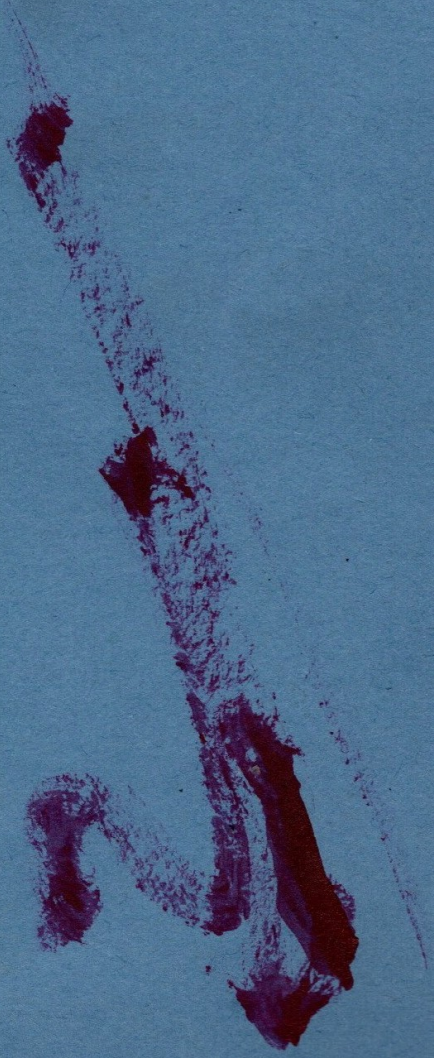




samskar

gh coyote

Born of pain the longing, their song had the power to
break the unhappiness of the world —

from *The Story of Layla* and Majnun
by Ganjavi Nizami

For all of the ladies of the Knight

Edited/Prepared by Karen A. Bates-Crouch
Third Printing: February 1996

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The squad room din was exceptionally loud. A woman alternately wept and screamed in another office and there had already been two scuffles at the desk sergeant's podium in the front foyer. Inside the detective squad room, phones rang constantly; outside, sirens howled incessantly, and there were the rumblings of a tension headache in Detective Nick Knight's skull. "Merde," he swore under his breath. He blinked rapidly to flush the pain away, but with little lasting relief. The manilla folders piled in front of him were evidence of the current caseload he shared with his partner, Don Schanke. Neatly typed labels on each tab bore a particular name, but with another jab of pain behind his faded blue eyes, the small black letters blurred momentarily. He focused, inwardly amused with the knowledge that his eyesight far exceeded any mortal's and he would never require glasses. The vanity of the urban vampire.

Nick flipped open the top folder and reviewed the current status of an especially violent homicide they'd investigated nearly a week earlier. A female Hispanic, early forties, found floating in a small, reedy pond generally inhabited by a few seasonal ducks and occasionally Canadian geese. Because the pond was located in one of the less travelled areas of St. John's cemetery, it was not frequented by visitors, especially during fall and winter. Consequently, the victim had been dead several days before being discovered by a grounds keeper out hanging salt sticks for winter deer and feed balls for birds. According to the pathologist's report, the woman had not been sexually assaulted, showed no signs of struggle, and most likely had been murdered at some other place and subsequently deposited in the water. There were no tire tracks in or around the shoreline that were discernable as being associated with the crime. A seemingly perfect murder, simple and neat, nothing outstanding. Unless one remembered that the victim's head was nowhere at the scene.

Nick re-read the report with growing anxiety. Another victim of man's violence and the police had little with which to form a case. He bolted when warm feminine fingers touched the back of his neck.

"Hey, you okay?" Natalie Lambert's voice was a mix of concern and professionalism. "Nick, I'm sorry, I didn't intend to startle you."

The blond detective calmed, looked up sheepishly at the doctor and forced a pained half-smile. "It's all right, Nat. I'm just feeling tense. Haven't been sleeping well."

"It's the full moon," Don Schanke said flippantly, as he sauntered back to his desk from a file cabinet.

"It's what, Schank?" Knight asked.

"Full moon," the older officer repeated as he thumped into the chair and flopped a stack of folders onto his already cluttered desk. "All the crazies come out during a full moon, everybody knows that."

"Crazies, huh?" Nick mumbled.

Schanke's round face twisted into a sneer. "Yeah, you know, werewolves, vampires..."

"Vampires!?" Natalie and Nick chorused. They looked at one another, exchanging quizzical looks.

Schanke began clucking, "Lighten up, you two! It's just a joke and besides, it's almost Hallowe'en, right?"

"I guess we should guard ourselves against the children of the night, eh, Schanke?" Nick was bemused.

Don looked up from his paperwork with a serious expression. "Hey, don't be totally skeptical, Knight. Myra's great-aunt Louisa told her they really exist. Back in the old country, people have a healthy respect for werewolves and vampires."

"Oh, I see," the younger cop nodded. "And just how does great-aunt Louisa come by this forbidden knowledge?"

"She's seen 'em," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Uh-huh," Nick was fascinated. "And has she seen them in the new country as well?"

"You know, I never asked," Don mugged. He shuffled papers as he spoke. "But she claims she can spot one, has the gift of second sight, Myra says. Maybe you can meet her sometime and ask her yourself."

Nick looked sidelong at Natalie. "That would be interesting, don't you agree, Nat?"

"Sure." She failed to share his humor. The flash of pain again crossed Nick's handsome face and Natalie's hands went to his shoulders. "Are you going to be all right?"

He covered her fingers with his right hand. "Yeah, it'll pass. I'm just feeling edgy, I guess."

"Wrong!" Schanke contradicted. "What you really need, Knight, is a social life."

"Is that your professional opinion, Don, or just a friendly observation?" Dr. Lambert asked him.

"Both," the dark-haired man said. "Knight works and sleeps, that's about it. He's addicted to his job and needs a little, uh, diversion."

"Diversion?" Nick asked cautiously.

"Hey, Nick, you're not a bad-looking guy," Schanke point out. "A lotta women probably go for the slightly shaggy, leather-jacket type."

"Ah, female diversion," the taller man noted.

"Yeah, sure," Don agreed. "You'd feel a whole lot better after a little action. Right, Doc?"

Natalie feigned a masque of seriousness. "You're probably right, Don."

"I'm fortunate you're both so concerned about my sex life," Nick said quietly.

"Knight, please!" Schanke's voice elevated. "There's a lady present."

Natalie retained her composure. "Yes, but I am a doctor. I understand these things." Her mood shifted suddenly. "And I want both of you to know that I am reluctant to give you my findings, but the identity of the floater has been confirmed as Carmella DiMarco. The ID snag had to do with an alien work permit computer glitch."

"Lisa Cooper's babysitter?" Don asked, incredulous. "Geez, she was a nice lady."

Nick scanned the medical report. "Does immigration feel this case falls under their jurisdiction, Nat?"

"Preliminary reports are negative," Natalie replied. She placed a second, thin, blue forensics folder atop the stack on Nick's desk. "In fact, she was applying for permanent status and eventual citizenship, in the hope of bringing her family here. Based on the records and affidavits from employers, it would have been granted. Sorry to have to make this personal for you guys, but those are the facts."

The door next to their adjoining desks opened and a weary Joe Stonetree walked out. He slid a small slice of paper onto Schanke's desk. "I'm putting

you two on this case. Get over there immediately. You too, doctor."

"The Eternal Beach?" Schanke read the slip.

"It's one of those fancy indoor tanning salons," the big man informed them. "The night attendant just found what can best be termed a well-done client in one of their booths."

"But tanning beds are on timers, Cap," Nick said. "I've used them and you really can't burn in one by accident. Even if you could, it wouldn't be fatal."

"It's no accident," Stonetree sighed. "Not only is the victim grossly burned, she's also been decapitated."

A dull silence pierced the thick atmosphere of the office. Joe Stonetree added solemnly, "Gentlemen, young lady, I think we've got a repeater out there."

"A serial killer, Captain?" Don asked. "You know what sort of panic the press could make of this?"

"Yes, and that's why I'd like a firm lid kept on this until such time as we can be certain who or what we're dealing with. You'd better get over there right now."

Schanke and Knight flew from the office, Natalie Lambert in quick pursuit. The cacophony of the squad room rose again as a fist fight broke out down the corridor. Joe heaved a weary sigh and muttered, "Damn full moon." He trudged back into his office. A glass window in a door shattered as the fight escalated.

****

The air in the tiny cubicle smelled of UV tanning ointment, dried sweat, blood and burnt flesh. Dr. Natalie Lambert examined the headless corpse on the tanning bed. Her mouth moved as she made hushed observations into a micro-recorder. As she continued her cursory ministrations, she shook her long, unruly brown locks against the incongruities of the crime scene. The intense smell of spent blood hit Nick's senses and he felt a wave of hunger and light-headedness battle inside him. He swallowed hard, forcing back the blood taste from his tongue as he entered the booth. "Any first impressions, Nat?" He asked. He slipped on a regulation pair of surgical gloves.

She looked up from where she knelt beside the body. "Uh-huh," she bobbed her head. "Where's the blood?"

He weaved slightly, then steadied himself.

"Hey, Nick, are you feeling okay?" She stood up quickly, her small delicate hands went to his arms. "Nick?"

"I, I'm okay, really," he stammered. "Just have a lot on my mind, I guess. That and a damn headache." He smiled, "Don't worry." Nick craned his neck to look over her shoulder. "So you were saying about the blood...?"

"Yup. Where is it?" she repeated. "The amount of blood at this crime scene is not consistent with decapitation. "It's as though the murderer had a bucket handy, and I'm not ruling that out, either. Stranger things have been known to happen."

"Decapitation isn't exactly an everyday crime, Nat," the cop told her.

"No, but there has been, as you know, a dramatic increase in ritualistic crime," the forensics chief reminded him.

"You feel this and the first victim are possibly ritual killings?"

She looked thoughtful before answering. "In my experience, it's entirely possible and..." she paused for emphasis, "as Don reminded us, it is <u>that</u> time of year."

"You can't mean Hallowe'en," he smirked.

She shrugged, "Why not? Listen, Nick, did you know the Toronto animal shelters issued a press release stating that no private or public shelter would sell black cats or kittens for the entire month of October?"

"I hadn't heard that," he admitted.

"Whether the people were serious practitioners of black majick or kids seeking thrills, an inordinate number of black cat mutilations have been logged every year around the holiday," she informed him. "The movement began down in the States--Chicago, Ohio--a few years ago and the humane groups up here followed suit. So, if this sort of sickness can affect helpless animals, there is no reason to believe helpless people would be spared."

For an instant, Nick Knight flashed back to a darker, more savage time. He could still remember the terrified screeches of cats being slaughtered and burned alive because some fools believed them to be the devil's emissaries. And in their ignorance they destroyed the cats and their first line of defense against the Plague. Ignorance breeds such pestilence. He now looked sadly at the remains on the cold tanning bed. "And what of the victim? Do we know anything?"

"Female, forties, I suspect," she answered. "She must have laid on the bed under the lights for several hours to have burned, but I'll have to do tests to give you more details. She may have been burned with a reagent and deposited here. I'm not ready to say."

"How about an identity?" came a male voice behind them. They turned in unison to face Don Schanke, looking very grim.

"You know who this is?" Nick asked.

"The attendant, Jackie Parsons, pulled the night's guest cards." He proffered a large pre-printed index card. "Every regular member of the salon buys packages of sessions which are recorded on these cards, and I am sorry to say that our barbecued victim is none other than <u>your</u> favorite radio shrink, Knight."

Nick's face revealed his horrified surprise. "Christina Noble?"

"None other," Don confirmed. "She's been a regular since 1988, when this place first opened."

"This isn't going at all well, Schank," Knight said warily. "We know both of the women from former cases."

"Yeah, and Stonetree is gonna pull us off this unless we can convince him otherwise. I don't know about you, partner, but I'd prefer we find this psycho."

"Agreed," Nick said. "Maybe we can convince the captain it's a coincidence."

"Get real, Nick," Schanke chortled. "We'll have as much luck convincing him it's the full moon." He turned away to further question the remaining patrons.

"Maybe that's just what it is," Natalie said quietly as she returned to her examination.

Outside, the rumble of thunder echoed. Nick Knight experienced a stab of pain in his head along with a fleeting moment of impending doom. His mind raced over the facts of the dual homicides and he was again certain he'd overlooked a vital, obvious clue.

****

The pathology department sounded hollow and hushed as Nick padded toward the autopsy room where Natalie Lambert worked on the remains of

Dr. Christina Noble. "Hi, anything yet?" he asked as Natalie looked up and acknowledged his presence.

"Too early," she said. "I don't want to rush this and make mistakes. If, in fact, we are dealing with a serial killer, we cannot afford any margin of error or the press will have a field day."

"They already are," Nick told her. "You can't keep the violent death of a prominent psychiatrist secret for long, especially after her own association with a series of murders not long ago."

"God, what a mess," the doctor moaned.

"This is going to be a royal headache for Stonetree."

"Speaking of headaches, how's yours, Nick?" she demanded.

"I'm coping," he faltered. "It's just tension."

"What's bothering you?" she asked pointedly.

"Nothing," he quickly replied. "And everything."

"Wanna talk about it? It might help," Nat suggested. Before he could make an excuse she tapped his chest with her finger. "Besides, I just volunteered you to drive me home."

"Oh, really?" he grinned. "And what, pray tell, happened to your car?"

She offered a comical face, "Seems the rain tied up everyone at my service station with towing so my car is up on the blocks, sans tires or brakes, until Tim can get to it. I was going to call a cab, but what the hell, your rates are better."

He found himself laughing as she carefully draped Christina's body and wheeled the gurney to the vault. "My life has been plagued by manipulative women," he said sarcastically. An image flickered across his memories, bringing a softness to his attractive features. "Not that I've minded..."

The image dissipated as a crackle of lightning brightened the night sky outside the lab.

****

The storm struck fiercely as Knight pulled the '62 Cadillac away from the curb. Even with his enhanced vision and reflexes, he found driving in the downpour a challenge.

Natalie Lambert pulled her navy, wool coat tighter around her legs. "Was Schanke right, Nick? Are you addicted to the job to the exclusion of everything and everyone else? Is that why you're stressed out? Or is it something more?"

The car radio was turned to an FM band specializing in classic rock. Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" was building to a crescendo. The music seemed to act like a soundtrack to the drama inside the Caddy.

"Or," Natalie asked hesitantly, "Is it the hunger, Nick? Struggling with an addiction. It must be overwhelming at times."

Nick guided the big car through the steady rainfall. After several blocks he finally replied. "It's not the job, Natalie. I'm straight on that, but the vampire need is always there fighting for my reason...battling my addiction."

"Addiction?" the doctor repeated. "What other addiction?"

"Other than the obvious," he announced. "I have had only one other persistent need in my life."

As if on cue the radio speakers burst alive with a throbbing guitar wailing. Natalie, jolted by the suddenness of the song, reached for the volume knob.

"No!" Nick ordered curtly. "You can't turn it off."

The petite woman eased back, bewildered, as the detective pumped up the volume and the auto's interior resounded with the hard-driving music.

"Why?" she asked over the beat.

A faraway, almost mystical, look crossed Nick Knight's very handsome face. His voice was choked with emotion,"Because it's my addiction."

They drove through the soaked neon-lit streets of Toronto with "Layla" exploding from the speakers.

****

When the song downshifted to its gentler piano-guitar duet, Nick spoke again. "Have you ever heard the legend of Layla, Nat?"

Her trim shoulders shrugged beneath the coat. "I guess everyone who likes rock and roll knows that Eric Clapton wrote the song 'Layla' for Pattie Boyd, who was George Harrison's wife, and..."

He cut her off mid-sentence. "No, no, I meant the original story."

"I never knew there was one," Natalie admitted.

His eyes never strayed from the road stretching before them, even when he stopped at an intersection for a red light. Natalie watched, fascinated, as his large, yet elegant, hands caressed the steering wheel.

"The legend dates to 1188, and was written by the Persian poet Ganjavi Nizami," he said dreamily. "A story of madness and passion, of Majnun and Layla, a man and a woman with a love never consummated."

"Why...I mean, how can an ancient love story become an addiction? I'm very confused. I can't comprehend how something so old and probably obscure to most people could become so intense that it becomes an obsession." She was genuinely bewildered. "I truly want to understand what's bothering you, Nick." She paused. "I care, Nick."

He smiled and reached over to touch her hand fondly, briefly. "Don't you think I know that by now, Nat?" He suggested they go to his loft, if she was willing. "There's a great deal to explain."

His tone was childlike, she thought, needful. "I want to hear everything," came her encouraging reply.

Knight steered the vehicle toward 101 Gateway Lane.

****

There was pervading peacefulness against the storm here in Nick's home, Natalie Lambert considered as she settled comfortably into the couch and pulled her curvy legs up, her stockinged feet tucked beneath a floppy throw pillow. She thanked her host as he handed her a large steaming mug of fragrant Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee.

Nicholas slid into his favorite chair, his gaze caught by the embers bright and crackling in the fireplace. He spoke evenly, rhythmically, as though he'd rehearsed every syllable and phrase a thousand times before. "Everyone has addictions, Natalie," the golden-haired police officer began. "Small, large, illegal, frivolous, whatever. And I've got a need I sometimes think is stronger than even blood."

Natalie's large brown eyes blinked in wonderment. She found herself hypnotized by the warm honeyed way he related his story. Outside, the rain raged.

"It was only a century ago," his wide mouth tipped in a faint smile. "Hard to believe, even for me. We were in England at the time, London specifically."

"We?" she asked.

"Janette, LaCroix, and me," Knight explained before continuing. "It was the height of the Victorian era and incredible changes were occurring every-

where. Poverty was rampant, opium was the drug of choice, overt sexuality was on every street corner and in every parlor, and by the end of 1888, a madman would be slicing up prostitutes in Whitechapel. We couldn't have set a better tableaux for our hunting. It was so easy. Prey was plentiful because life was cheap."

His bitterness brought a chill to Natalie's body. She hugged herself to ward off the cold feeling, and brought the coffee closer to her face so the steam was warm against her cheeks.

"I had begun questioning the life long before that time," Nicholas took up his narrative. "I felt no pleasure in stalking and killing humans, yet, I was driven to feed my hunger. I didn't want to kill, but I could find no intellectual reason not to. Limehouse, the docklands, Whitechapel, the whole area was our hunting ground, the equivalent of a human grocery store." Nick's eyes closed for a moment. "I grew ashamed of what I was doing, but I...I didn't know why. There was no reason to deny what I am, but, Nat, something inside me felt foreign--frightening, and exciting at the same time." He touched the fingers of his left hand to his lips, a habit whenever he grew pensive. "Her name was Alexa," he said quietly. "And we met over a dead body."

Natalie's long thick lashes fluttered in surprise; she gasped aloud. Any questions she had were erased from her lips as Nick began the history.

****

It was the pungent scent of newly-spent blood which had attracted the vampires to the noisy Whitechapel street corner. A small gathering of locals stood around the alleyway entrance where a dead woman's body had fallen. Someone had hailed the coppers and in the middle of it all was a small, dark figure crouched down in the dirt and rain and refuse examining the body. The person stood up, removed the cloak and covered the prostitute with incredible gentleness. Nicholas Knight moved slightly forward and it was only then he realized that the attending physician was a woman. The police appeared to know her, as did most of the people in the crowd. He heard the presiding constable address her as Doctor Foxworth as she gathered paraphernalia into a worn black medical valise.

"Sergeant Morton," the physician addressed him, her voice deep and authoritative. "Have your men take Lottie around to St. Bart's. Dr. Philip Carey should be on duty, I believe. Tell him to send me a copy of the autopsy and let me know about arrangements for her burial."

"Yes, ma'am," the large bear-like officer nodded. "She had a young'un, I recall."

"A daughter Bonnie," the woman informed him. "She was Emily's companion. They were together..." The words hung in the fetid air.

"Beggin' your pardon, Doctor, I didn't realize she was the one found with Emmy," Morton stammered. "So many little ones in the streets these days that it's hard to keep a track on all of 'em."

The dark-gowned woman snapped the satchel closed and forced a feeble smile. "I know, Sergeant, I know." A pause. "I don't suppose there's anything more on who murdered them?"

"No, ma'am, not a thing," the policeman told her. "Inspector Pitt is keeping the file open though and if anyone can learn the truth, he can."

"I admire him also," Alexa Foxworth agreed. "Good man. Anyhow, Sergeant, please tell Dr. Carey I will be especially interested in any suspicions he might have concerning which local butcher murdered one of my girls."

"Yes, m'am, I'll report to you personally," he tipped his helmet and turned on his heel to follow the pathetic funeral cortege.

"Thank you, Sergeant," the doctor said. She watched wearily as Lottie's broken body was heaved unceremoniously onto a handcart and rolled down the gaslit street. The crowd began to disperse. Drizzle came down once more, ready to cleanse the curb and gutter of the whore's blood.

"Hardly a life worth grieving over," LaCroix smirked. "Like so much refuse carted off."

"None of them are worth grieving over, chér," Janette giggled.

As the couple turned to leave, the woman doctor spun about, heavy skirts billowing out. "Sir!" she called out.

They turned to face her, LaCroix with all his well-tailored finery and gaunt arrogance, Janette exotically beautiful and so elegantly decadent, her gloved fingers curling through his arm.

"Are you addressing me, Mam'selle?" LaCroix's chiseled features defined sharply as he stepped under the glare of a gaslight. Janette regarded the human with bored indifference.

"Monsieur," Alexa stood before LaCroix defiant and unafraid, eyes unblinking, Nicholas observed. "I rather doubt if you can even remember the value of a human life," she said bluntly.

The vampire glided closer, his stark black and white image nearly engulfing the somewhat diminutive female in his shadow. For a fleeting moment Nicholas thought LaCroix would strike out and take her. Instead he smiled coldly. "You are judgmental, as well as impertinent, young woman. This is ofttimes a lethal combination. A fair warning," he added. "Be more temperate in your assessment of a stranger's character. It could be fatal."

The woman studied the tall, imposing gentleman, carefully weighing her words. "My dear sir, you insult my intelligence if you perceive me to be of rash judgment. As a medical doctor and member of the scientific community, I am analytical in my observations, and I can state what I, and everyone else, can readily see: that you, sir, are a parasite and your kind would be better served feeding among your own kind." She curtsied. "Good evening, sir, mam'selle. Safe journey home." She turned, gathering her skirts and stepped off the sidewalk and strode away, medical bag in hand. Nicholas felt a smile touch his lips.

LaCroix was both amused and angered. "Why, I do believe the little bitch insulted me! She ought to be taught a lesson in manners."

"Such spirit would make her blood spicy, mon chér," Janette said hungrily. A smattering of raindrops kissed her icy cheek and she pouted. "But the weather is turning inclement again. Perhaps tomorrow night?"

LaCroix straightened his great cape and scanned the stormy night sky. "Yes, tomorrow will be soon enough." He turned to where his companion stood partially hidden by the shadows of a doorway. "Nicholas, are you coming?"

The blonde young man stepped into the circle afforded by the gas street lamp. He watched the retreating female. "I think not," he finally replied. "The night is still young."

"My dear Nicholas," LaCroix pursed his thick lips and smiled. "Indulge yourself if it amuses you, but I do believe this one will struggle a bit."

"Bon appetit, Nikola," Janette kissed his cheeks as was her custom. She giggled coquettishly, took LaCroix's arm and they disappeared in the growing fog.

He found himself racing after the physician. "Doctor Foxworth!" he addressed her as he drew near.

She turned, "Yes?"

He was unprepared for seeing her so clearly, so very close.

****

Natalie Lambert was grateful for the subdued lighting of the room. She was certain Nick would discern the flush on her cheeks, an uneasy mix of natural curiosity and basic envy. Natalie suddenly felt plain, unappealing. The look of recollection crossing Nick's attractive features could best be described as rapturous. She dragged the air for a breath and asked, "She was that beautiful, Nick?"

The bubble burst as Knight laughed and Nat felt immediately foolish. "No, not beautiful," he chuckled. "Not pretty like you, Nat..."

Her cheeks felt hot.

"Or exotic like Janette. No, Alex--that's what I call her--no, she's not beautiful. She's remarkably...ordinary." His expressive hands were moving now, finger-drawing the images in his mind. "Except maybe for her mouth. It's the sort of mouth," he described dreamily, "you want to bite into like a ripe fruit." He took note of Natalie's discomfort, her downcast eyes. "I'm sorry, Nat. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

She looked at him. "I've never heard you speak this way, Nick. It's a side of you I never knew about."

"I'm a fairly secretive person," he stated flatly. "All part of my image in the mortal world, the carefully maintained facade against prying eyes and inquisitive minds. Never get too close, never reveal the hidden face, never..." He stopped suddenly, got up from the chair and tended to the fire in the grate.

"But," the pretty doctor said, "I've seen what you are, Nick."

He replaced the iron poker, gazing at her with immense affection. "Yes, you have, and I feel safe that you know my secrets. You're an exceptional person and a trusted friend, but I learned centuries ago not to trust easily, or quickly." He settled back into the chair, looking impossibly attractive bathed in firelight. For the first time in days, Nick Knight appeared relaxed, calm, almost vulnerable. It was distracting for Natalie, in a most pleasant way.

She shook her bounty of cocoa locks and cleared her thoughts. "You were saying you called her name..."

"Yeah, I called her name and she whirled around so quickly some curls fell loose from her hairstyle. You have to understand that Alex has incredibly thick, uncontrollable hair. She's never successfully mastered keeping it styled and since the fashion at the time was pinned up and off the neck, it was pretty much a disaster."

"Nice talk," she chided.

"You're taking it wrong," he insisted. "That's not a criticism. I fact, it's rather alluring, I think. It was raining lightly and I remember the rain on her face, in her hair. I remember how easily I could have killed her."

Natalie's eyes grew wide with alarm. She clutched a pillow to her chest.

****

"May I offer you my cloak, Doctor, against the rain?" Nicholas Knight was most effusive. "You appear to have surrendered yours."

Alexa, absorbed by his visage, smiled. "Are you then to be my golden knight, come to protect me from the perils of darkness, sir?"

He answered quickly that he'd be whomever she needed. "I have armor no longer, dear lady, only a cloak to shield away the storm."

"How could I refuse so chivalrous a gentleman?" she asserted. She gathered up her dark skirts and snuggled inside the heavy black cape, fitting herself perfectly against her protector's hard physique.

The clouds burst open, transforming the streets and alleys into sooty rivers. By the time the couple arrived at their destination some three blocks away, they were soaked, hem and cuffs. She unlocked the door and invited her guest in, sealing her fate. "Here, let me take your cloak," the doctor dropped her valise to a wooden chair near to the door and she reached up to remove the man's garment. She hung the wet cape on a coat tree. She bolted the door shut. "I'll light the grate," Alexa held up an oil lamp, glowing. "And I'll turn up the gas." The narrow hallway flooded with golden gaslight. "Let there be light!" she pronounced with mock drama. She pivoted to face her guest. "All the better to see my noble cavalier." Her face softened when she finally saw her companion's face, so boyishly handsome--thoughtful blue-gray eyes, thick curled straw-colored hair, generous mouth. She noticed also the expensive cut of his black suit and the hand-stitched white linen ruffled shirt and elegant brocade weskit. "You truly are of the manor born," Alexa observed. "Every bit the well-appointed gentleman, though hopefully blessed with more humanity than your associates."

"The only human blessing of late I have enjoyed, doctor, is meeting you." Nicholas took her hand, brushed her knuckles with his lips, his eyes never leaving hers.

"And you also have me at a distinct disadvantage, sir," she demurred. She made no attempt to retrieve her fingers from his grasp. "You obviously know my name and occupation while I know only that you are exceedingly chivalrous. Obviously well-to-do, and..." she smiled most femininely, "most attractive even when damp."

He returned her smile and reluctantly released her hand. "My name is Nicholas Knight."

"Ah, then you really <u>are</u> my knight!" she exclaimed. "This must be kismet. We must be destined for some great adventure."

"Or romance?" he interjected impishly.

She felt heady for a second, then dismissed the sensation. "I dare say we've crossed the threshold to a more personal relationship. Therefore, I shall call you Nicholas. You, in turn, may call me Alexa."

Nick bowed. "I welcome the privilege. It's been my experience that many unique and memorable experiences occur upon crossing a threshold." He followed his hostess into a small, yet inviting, parlor. The few pieces of furniture were third-hand or more, very worn, but all was tidy and clean. The smell of cinnamon and oranges wafted fragrantly. In the grate, a fire was ebbing and he offered to revive it.

"I'd better get out of this dress before I catch my death." She was very forthright. "It's soaked in spite of your gallantry, Nicholas."

He heard a rustling of petticoats and skirts and glanced up from where he knelt beside the fire. Nicholas was unable to hide the pleasure upturning his mouth. Alexa had stepped out of the puddle of wet clothes with grace and a total lack of pretence. She wore a white camisole and pantaloons and dark stockings, a fetching costume that flattered her full hourglass figure. "Oh, have I embarrassed you, Sir Knight?" She held up the outer clothes waist high over her arms and then arranged them over the back of a wingback chair. "I

am not given to modesty," she shrugged nonchalantly. "I imagine my profession has much to do with my attitude. Down here we haven't the luxury of privacy or privilege. Surviving to another dawn is the last remaining luxury for most of my patients and neighbors." She fanned out the wet folds of her gown carefully as though it was damask silk, not homespun cotton serge.

He was thoughtful. He murmured, "Yes, seeing the dawn would seem a great luxury to...many." He raised his voice slightly. "Enjoying the view from my vantage point is equally as delightful, however."

One dark eyebrow rose and the corner of her wide generous mouth curved as she slipped on a kimono. Black with pale mauve roses for accents. "And he's flirtatious as well as chivalrous. What of your oath, Sir Nicholas, to uphold a lady's virtue?"

"T'was long ago I swore my pledge, m'lady." He swept the air with his right arm. "I have always treated a lady as she would have me treat her." As he came closer, he became aware of her warmth. Restraint, he told himself. "Though I must admit, your expectations of me are somewhat mysterious. You are a person of seeming contradiction."

She eased forward slightly, looking up through a tangle of damp blondish hair. "Never make a rash judgment about what I feel or expect, Nicholas. You would be very wise not to make the assumptions that rather odious gentleman made on the street." She was prideful by her bearing. "I am not a whore, nor am I a prim proper saint, hollow inside. What I am is a human being and I will permit no one to treat me as anything less because I am a woman."

"No one should, Alexa," Nicholas agreed. "It is your humanness which only enhances your womanhood and I, as a new admirer, respect so balanced and complete a composition." He felt a curious quivering at that instant, standing at arm's length from her, smelling her humanity, hearing her elevated pulse and feeling unsettled by her uncommon candor. He was as yet unaware of how radical and irreversible crossing her threshold would become. It would be Nick whose fate was sealed this stormy night.

She broke the silence. "Would you share some tea with me, Nicholas? Or perhaps a glass of claret to ward off the chill?"

"Yes," came the feeble answer. A whirl of confusion churned inside him, enhanced by his hunger for her blood, sweet and warm...and the intense yearning to indulge in her humanity--vital, honest, strong. He'd come to her home to take her blood, but he wanted--no, he needed so much more.

"Tea, or wine?"

His reverie was shattered and he was flustered. "I'm sorry. Tea would be fine, thank you."

As she walked away, kimono sweeping the area rugs, she bade him sit close to the fireplace to warm himself as she prepared their refreshment. Nicholas' eyes followed her retreating form until she disappeared into the kitchen. What is this, he questioned, what could possibly be prompting me to behave so utterly mundane and old-fashioned? Tea before the fire indeed! LaCroix would have chastised him for his ridiculous behavior. Janette would shrug haughtily, tell him he was being sentimental and again remind him that mortals were inferior and surely no more valuable than cattle. He should take the woman, satisfy himself and leave. Better yet, he should leave altogether, he admonished himself. Nicholas pulled himself out of the patterned chair determined to leave, when his hostess' kind voice announced her return. He sat back down.

"Oh, good, you've taken the best chair," Alexa was pleased. "Right beside the hearth where it's warm." She placed the tea tray on the low oval table in front of him and set the kettle to boiling on the hook over the blaze. She knelt on the rag rug at the table and arranged the inexpensive china service. He noted the homespun cleanliness to everything in spite of worn corners and scratched finishes on the furniture and accessories. All was terribly simple, very ordinary. So completely human. A long suppressed desire stirred deep inside his being.

Her hands went to the dampened upsweep of her hair. She pulled the pins holding the waves and Nicholas watched the thick burnished blonde waves cascade over her shoulders. The firelight caught the natural tint of her tresses and it made her hair look enflamed. A more base longing grew in him, but he forced it back.

Alexa poured and then handed him a cup filled with steaming tea. He took it, his fingers brushing against hers. She never flinched. "There, Sir Nicholas," she announced, "a fire to warm you outside, tea to warm you inside, and I guarantee you'll soon be feeling human again."

Nick felt an unfamiliar chill traverse his body, a twisting in his gut. "I wish it were so," he whispered hoarsely, eyes locked into hers. The cup rattled in the saucer, slopping boiling tea over his hand. Alexa jumped up and rounded the table as the china fell with a moist thud into the rug. He leapt from the chair and distanced himself.

"Nicholas! You've burned yourself!" She went to him, ready to administer to the injury. "I am so very sorry. I didn't mean to be so careless."

"It's nothing." His voice was terse. "Nothing."

Alexa took his hands in hers and carefully examined them for burns. "You're right...nothing." She attempted to read the tight expression hardening his face. "You're trembling, Nicholas." Her fingers grasped his wrists and he was shocked by the strength in her large hands. "Something is not right. I clearly saw your hand scalded with the tea, but there is no evidence of injury and now you're shaking uncontrollably as though you were deathly cold."

A sardonic laugh slipped by. "How very astute of you, Doctor," he chided. "Your diagnosis is flawless."

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "Tell me, Nicholas, tell me what's wrong."

His gaze became levelled at hers. All gentleness evaporated from his eyes and there was a very hard edge to his voice. "You do not wish to become involved in my--malady, my dear doctor." Ominously, he added, "My condition is something you could well live without." He tried to free himself, but her grasp tightened on his wrists.

"Could you?" she asked. "Could you live well without your condition?"

"I wish I knew," he answered, his voice pitched low to nearly a whisper. "But the centuries don't lie and there is no cure in your medical satchel for my kind. Trust me, Doctor, I beg of you. Let me leave before..." the words clogged in his throat like verbal bile. The struggle was becoming increasingly difficult. Even now her heightened emotions made her blood rush faster. Nicholas' head throbbed with the intensity of her heartbeat. His mouth and throat were parched.

"Before what?" she persisted. "Tell me, please! What do you mean by centuries? Whatever it is, I am certain we can find some relief for you. It is you who must trust me," she insisted. She refused to relinquish her hold on him.

The man was amazed at the ferocity of this small mortal's passion to help. He looked to her fingers circling his wrists. Her neatly-trimmed nails dug into his flesh; had he been human, he would have protested his discomfort. Following his gaze, Alex realized how tightly she was holding on to him. She caught her breath, and opened her vise-like hold. "Forgive me," she stammered. "I hadn't realized how I must have hurt you."

"'Tis I who could harm you, Alexa," he told her warily. "I should leave now before I lose control."

"Lose control?" The woman became rigid, though she remained steadfastly close to him. "What are you trying to tell me..." She searched his eyes. "What is it, Nicholas, that frightens you so? Have you a disease diagnosed as terminal? Is that it, are you dying?"

Serenity, like an intense wave, rushed through him, and he knew instinctively that he could trust her. He needed to tell her. "I am dead, Alexa," Nicholas spoke evenly. He sought any hint of fear on her face, but there was none. "I died in 1228."

She cleared her throat. "What...what are you saying?" She was unable to decipher his enigmatic expression. "I truly want to know, to comprehend what you..."

He interrupted. "I am one of the immortals, Alexa, a vampire."

Her mind raced with a myriad of questions, yet words would not form sentences of any logic. "Vampire?" she repeated feebly. "You are telling me that you believe yourself to be a being who...ah, I can't believe I'm asking this!"

"I am a being who lives on human blood," the tall, slender gentleman told her. He expected her to react more...humanly, but she held her ground, much to his complete amazement. "I am a vampire."

"Ah, yes!" She was wildly enthusiastic, as though she had made a tremendous discovery. "You mean you're a hemotajac, that's it, isn't it? How foolish of me! I must be getting feebleminded to forget your condition--then again, it is rather a revolutionary concept, is it not?"

Nick's astonishment was evident and well-earned. "Alexa, did you hear what I said?"

She reached forward and grasped his arms. He felt a tremble of sorts at the gentle pressure she exerted. "Yes, yes, of course," Alexa assured him. "And I believe with the proper medical and psychiatric treatments...or, are you skeptical of psychiatry?" His mouth gaped open, but she rattled on. "I am not, but many people are, and it is so foolish to dismiss treatments that might change the complexion of the entire medical communi..."

Frustrated now, Nick broke in, interrupting her excitement. "Alex!" It was the first time he would call her this. The brusqueness shattered her thoughts. She fell silent, somehow sensing he had more incomprehensible words for her. "Alex, please try and understand! I'm not a...what was it?"

"Hemotajac," came the faint response.

"Whatever that is," he admitted his ignorance. "I have never heard of such a thing. I am a vampire and I was brought over in 1228. I realize how unbelievable this all sounds, but it is the truth." He cupped her face with his hands and held her in check. "I can prove what I say but you must have trust in me."

Her head nodded, the abundant golden rust waves fluttering.

"Prepare yourself," he admonished. "This will be unbelievable, but very much the truth of what I am." He held her arms to brace her. "Are you ready?"

Another small nod of assent. He stepped away from the small woman, and lowered his head to transform. Alexa straightened when she heard a faint rumbling growl come from his throat, and she fought the incredible urge to take a defensive stance across the room, or preferably across the street. She heard his breathing become more rapid, akin to a refined panting sound. It was not human sounding at all.

And yet, her scientific curiosity was piqued and from the moment she'd heard him call to her on the street, the doctor was captivated by this mysterious traveller. She was anxious, but not fearful.

Nicholas Knight slowly raised his head and she let out the breath she'd been holding with a small gasp. Her fingers curled into fists until her fingernails bit into her palms. It's real, she kept repeating to herself, he is a dark fantasy made flesh. Nick's face had hardened, lines and planes becoming sharper and more defined. His eyes glowed an unearthly green-gold, and most startling of all, his canines had elongated to needle-like points. The low growl was persistent. Hesitantly, Alexa brought her left hand up to his cheek. His flesh was chilled. He flinched at her heated touch and felt the old yearning tightening in his gut. He fought the impulse to abate his hunger, but it was difficult when her fingertips glided across his cheekbone, down his jaw to his mouth where she felt one fang exposed by his open mouth. He watched her eyes for any indication of fear, but he recognized only a sense of wonder at her delicate explorations. The back of her hand skimmed up to his cheek. In a throaty, low voice, Alexa asked, "Do you want to kill me, Nicholas?"

He swallowed the bitterness at the back of his tongue. He refused to lie to this remarkable young lady. "Yes." It was barely a whisper.

"Are you going to?" she asked without hesitation.

His hand went to her still damp hair and caught a wave of ringlets at her neck about his fingers. "No." The word came out with pain.

She watched, fascinated, as his face blurred back into its original handsome gentleness and his elongated teeth receded to a normal human length. She felt her heartbeat race at his touch. "What do you want of me?"

A sad, melancholic smile etched his mouth. "Tomorrow, the luxury to see the dawn."

She drew nearer. He felt the pulse in her breast against his chest and against his fingertips at her throat. She returned his smile, "Perhaps...if you can trust me."

He felt immeasurable peace pervading his entire being for the first time in centuries. He was unable to fathom the cause of the immense relief he experienced, an alien freedom he vaguely recalled from youth. Some inexplicable sense of humanity. He studied the unvarnished upturned face of Dr. Alexa Foxworth and reflected there was his answer. She was not beautiful, in fact, she was not especially pretty. But Alex, (as he now thought of her), carried a loveliness all her own--her face the reflection of intelligence, serenity of spirit, honesty, and unselfishness. And Alex was human, achingly human, which made her very desireable to Nick in all ways. He wanted to savor her humanness, to meld with it, to become one with it.

His hunger was for mortality. His hunger was to become human.

"I cannot trust you with my life, for I have no true life to pledge, Alexa," he told her. "But I trust you with my being, and all that I am."

"Then together we will seek--a cure--for your curse. I am ignorant of many aspects of vampirism, so you must instruct me in your knowledge, Nicholas.

The greater our shared knowledge, the more optimum the outcome for recovery."

"There is one other thing," he broached.

"Yes?" Her head tilted to the left.

Nick said, "You haven't said if you trust me not to harm you."

"It didn't seem necessary," came the sure reply. "If the legends are even marginally based in fact, then my fate was sealed when I invited you into my home. I am little more than prey, am I not?"

"So we are taught," he grudgingly agreed.

"And yet," she contradicted him gently, "You came to me as my knight, Nicholas, a gentleman. I trust my instincts that you are an honorable man, and I trust my heart, for I saw in your face a longing for life not unlike my own. We have both known too much darkness and death, I think." The paleness of her eyes glimmered with the fire's glow. "I admit I am selfish for companionship and purpose."

"Then we share equally in the sin," he replied.

She pressed two fingers across his lips to silence him. "No. There is no sin in being human, Nicholas."

"But I'm not human," he protested.

The palms of her hands rested against the ruffles of his pristine white shirt. "Immortals, like the gods, require no other being to be fulfilled, no other touch, no other voice, no need to share with another. Your existence has only been to hunt and to survive, careless of what destruction you've left behind. Am I truthful?"

Unfamiliar warmth ebbed through his limbs. "Yes."

"But now you admit to being needful of things far more uncomplicated than domination and more basic than hunting for food." She smoothed the ruffles of his blouse. "You need to touch another living being for the simple joy of feeling." She took his left hand in her right and brought it to her lips. Her kiss, chaste in its lightness, made him quiver.

"You desire to know that a kiss is not the prelude to death. You need to know that dawn will promise a new day of possibilities, not the guarantee of destruction."

Her smile was world-weary, yet knowing. "That is no sin, my dear cavalier. That is the need, the hunger to be human."

The vampire's fingers tightened around her hand, his urgency evident in his mesmerizing blue-toned eyes. "Help me. Please, Alexa...help me..."

She responded eagerly. "We will help one another, Nicholas."

They sat before the fireplace, talking for many hours while the storm raged on the street. As morning edged closer, she offered her guest refuge in the dry cellar below the consulting room of her surgery. Alexa brought a sheet, a patchwork comforter, and a freshly-cased pillow, arranging everything on a worktable she'd cleared.

"This isn't really necessary," he tried to explain.

"Probably not," the physician said, as she completed her task. "But it is civilized, and..." she added sweetly, "human." Unexpectedly, she embraced him. "Sleep well, Nicholas."

She began to climb the stone steps and paused. "Nicholas?"

"Yes?"

"Do you dream?"

"Yes, I do."

Alexa cast him a caring look. "Then I wish you sweet dreams and peaceful sleep." She disappeared up the stairwell with a flutter of her kimono.

The thick wooden door closed, the door bolted. Then silence. Removing his jacket, tie and vest, he unbuttoned his cuffs and collar. Nick was struck by the realization that he'd left his boots near the grate in the parlor above. Laughing softly, he lay on the make-shift cot. The linens smelled of soap and crushed herbs. The quilt carried her scent--a melange of talc, sandalwood soap and violet bath water. The aroma, intense to his very sensitive smell, wafted around him like a fragrant cloud, intoxicating him. The hunger stirred, but was consumed by weariness and on-coming daylight. He drifted into sleep, the coverlet in his arms.

He dreamt of being lost in the warm curves and hollows evoked by the smells. He dreamt of sharing the patchwork comforter with her.

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"We became lovers soon after," Nick concluded. A wry, yet wistful smile creased his handsome face. "I never left her after that."

Natalie gingerly asked, "Did you lose Alexa, Nick? Did she die?"

"Yes, to the mortal life," he answered somberly.

"She's a vampire?" Natalie inquired.

"Yes."

"Why isn't she with you?" Another question in the litany.

Again his fingers played against the corner of his mouth, a sure sign of uneasiness. "Fear and danger," he explained. "At first the excitement and newness obliterated everything, every consideration except being together. Things happened quickly in the beginning. I became consumed by the hope of becoming mortal. I became addicted to the dream." He paused, looked up, a few stray gold feathers of his hair fanned over his forehead. His mouth upturned into a wise smile. "Eventually, awakening comes, and the dream begins to dim."

"What happened?" she asked.

He sighed, his voice taking on an edge. "LaCroix happened."

"He tried to stop you?" she kept pressing.

"It was the end of our...friendship." So much disdain in his voice. "He hated Alexa. He held her responsible for my desire for freedom from the curse. He despised her for offering me hope and a taste of humanity. But most of all, he hated her for what he called 'infecting my heart.' " His gray-blue eyes focussed on a point of memory he alone could see. He rushed back to an expensively-appointed Victorian drawing room in a Kensington row house one perfect early October evening at sunset.

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"Well, fuck the little whore if you find it amusing," LaCroix snapped. His long, thick fingers absentmindedly stroked the taut strings of the antique mandolin he seemed to care for, one of his few cherished goods. "But do make an early end to this little diversion of yours, Nicholas. Your devotion to that unattractive wretch is becoming quite tedious and frankly, an embarrassment to others. I should have thought the folly of that little dancer had taught you the proper course to follow."

Nicholas Knight, his broad back to the older vampire, felt unaccustomed anger roiling in his gut. His fingers curled into fists and he shut his eyes. "Stop it, LaCroix," he seethed in a low growling voice. "Stop interfering in my life."

"In whose life?" LaCroix stopped strumming the instrument. "I think this bitch of yours has clouded your reason. Never forget that your life belongs to me."

Nicholas faced him. "I never forget, LaCroix. I never forget what I am or that you made me this way. But," he felt slightly more controlled, his tone becoming more even, "you have no dominion over my life, and I am determined to become mortal again."

"Do you really think you can be free, Nicholas?" He rose gracefully from the chaise he'd been lounging on and set aside the mandolin. "You are deluding yourself or else that wretched cow has somehow convinced you that she can affect a cure for your condition, as she probably calls it."

"I can see there is no possibility of reasoning with you," Knight observed. "I despise you. I am leaving."

LaCroix's long face masqued into a cold smile. "Tell me I am misinterpreting what you say, Nicholas. Tell me you haven't foolishly chosen her over us...over me."

The blonde man weighed his words carefully. "I choose to live my own life on my own terms, and I choose to live away from your degeneracy."

"Then you have also chosen that woman's fate," the older man stated flatly. Noticing the look of trepidation crossing Nick's fair face and hearing the rapid beat of his anxious heart, he added, "Not now, but at a time of my choosing, I will have my retribution."

Nicholas pleaded, "Please. LaCroix, enough of this! Alexa has done nothing to merit your wrath. I beseech you, don't hurt her."

Gliding toward the younger vampire, LaCroix studied Nicholas' beautiful upturned face. His large hand went to Nick's cold cheek with a twisted sort of affection and he noticed a pink wetness welling in those pale blue eyes.

Instinctively, Nicholas shuddered at the ancient's touch, a response to their centuries-old bonding. "Please," his voice barely a whisper, "let go...don't harm her..."

A sardonic smile creased the white, cadaverous face. "Why, Nicky, you're acting like a man in love again..."

Suddenly, he grabbed a handful of the long, loose curls at the nape of Nick's neck and jerked hard, restraining the fair-haired man. "But you would be wise," LaCroix snarled, "to remember that you are no longer a man, and I will not permit you to be corrupted by this human impurity called love." He shoved Nicholas into the piano. The keys clanked noisily, a vase jumped to the Oriental carpeting and shattered.

"Damn you!" Nicholas made an oath. "Damn you to hell. This goes far beyond love, LaCroix. Far beyond your darkness and evil." He turned and started out the room.

"You will never be free of me or what you are, my dear Nicholas," LaCroix warned him.

At the double doors, Knight swerved about to face the tall, dark-garbed man. "I will be free, LaCroix," Nick Knight promised. "Even if it takes seven more centuries, I will be free, and you can never destroy what possesses me now."

Laughing low and satanically, the ancient vampire merely repeated his own oath. "At a time of my choosing, Nicholas, I will be repaid."

The doors swept open, slammed shut, and Nicholas was gone.

The great house echoed with an eerie mandolin composition and periodic insane laughter.

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"I packed my valise, left instructions for the servants regarding my clothing trunk and personal possessions, and I moved out that night," Nick told Natalie. "In spite of the anger and threats, I left feeling strangely liberated."

Natalie ventured, "Who was the dancer LaCroix spoke of?"

Melancholy haunted his blue eyes. "An exquisite ballerina I had fallen in love with and in whom I saw the perfection of human purity. LaCroix tricked me into killing her. She was an angel and I destroyed her." He stared into the rolling yellow and orange flames in the hearth. "At the moment I realized what I had done, what LaCroix had engineered, I knew I could never take another human life as a vampire."

"But you took Alexa," Nat pointed out.

He looked to her, nodding. "Yes, I took Alex...so I could keep her forever."

"You must love Alex very much." The words tasted harsh on Natalie's lips, difficult to shape.

"We have forbidden those words. Love is a human thing, and we are not human," his voice was terse. She'd broached a restricted subject--she knew from his tone. Nick continued. "What I told LaCroix that night of our separation remains true even now, Nat. The bond between Alex and me goes far beyond love and is more intense than blood." His head tilted to the left. "It is quite incomprehensible and not human...but then, neither are we."

Hesitantly, Natalie addressed him. "Nick?"

"Hm?"

She exercised great care in choosing her words. "Why is Alexa an addiction?"

Nick spoke as though from oft-recited remembrances...even, melodious, weighty with emotion. As he spoke, she felt a warm sensation wash through her slender body.

"I left Kensington and had a cab take me to the surgery Alex operated. You cannot imagine the dichotomy of going from that finery to the squalor and crime where Alex chose to work." Vivid pictures rushed forward at a maddening pace. "I'd luxuriated in a curtained four-poster bed with crisp linen bedclothes, down comforter, pillows and satin coverlets. In Alex's neighborhood, a woman would whore for a few shillings to sleep in a vermin-infested straw mattress in a doss house. The first evening, I went with Alex on her rounds. I was appalled by the filth, the bugs, the stench of urine, vomit and unwashed bodies. The really fortunate people were able to rent a few feet of nautical rope in one of the doss houses." Noting the brown-haired woman's confused look, he explained. "They'd pile their belongings atop their section of rope and then drape themselves across the bundles. Not especially comfortable, but a person could breath and avoid being nibbled all night."

"My God, that's horrible." She was repulsed.

"You cannot truly imagine, Nat," he said. "The Thames, the open sewers and the slaughterhouses all gave up their noxious smells as well."

"Slaughterhouses?" Natalie's interest piqued further. "I take it this is how you began taking cow's blood."

"Yes, it was Alex's idea," he conceded. "Her theory was that substitution would speed recovery, rather the way Equal substitutes for sugar on diets or for diabetics."

"It's a sound idea," she readily agreed, adding with a pert smile, "not unlike my famous protein shakes, detective!"

"Infamous," he corrected her. Nick flexed his right leg, then laced his fingers together at the knee. "Our love affair was passionate and unquenchable," he prologued. "But the boundaries of mortality kept us apart. We shared a growing hunger for life, one I'd never imagined possible. We knew each other so intimately, and yet..." He cleared his throat nervously.

Natalie leaned toward him, lightly touching his knee with her fingers. "Nick, what's wrong?"

He faltered. "I, I never asked Alex to cross over. There came a moment when I knew I wanted her with me always. Selfishly, I brought her over without ever asking her if it was what she wanted as well." His shoulders slumped as he wearily slid further down in the chair and leaned his head on the headrest. "Alexa was the last human I brought over." He looked to his companion. "Until Richard."

Natalie vividly recalled the brief time her brother Richard had been immortal because of her pleas to Nick. She felt cold at the memory. "I've always wondered who the last one was..."

The detective again turned his eyes toward the hypnotic glow in the fireplace. "It was nearly Hallowe'en night and it was raining." His words were quite soft. "I have always associated night rain with Alex. I knew the moment we began making love that I could bring her over. My human desire obliterated any thought of stopping and she completely trusted me. She was committed to finding a way back to mortality for me and I had easily convinced myself I was doing her a great service when I was selfishly gratifying my own urges." He paused, as though the recollections were agonizing even after a century.

His voice was ragged when he started again. "Alex knew, of course. She could have stopped me, but she didn't. She never held back in life...she didn't hold back in death."

A shiver traversed Natalie's spine. Just the rain, she told herself, just this cold autumn rain.

Nick picked up his narrative. "We made love slowly, deliberately for what seemed like hours, though time was irrelevant. Nothing has been sweeter than my first taste of her blood. I wanted to be gentle, but it was so difficult to restrain myself. I'd never known such intensity. The purity of her trust and love, her passion for life, and for me, most of all, her goodness...I tasted everything..." His eyes closed briefly, then he resumed the retelling of that night. "I didn't want to frighten her or to hurt her, so I fed slowly, small measures followed by weakness, over many hours. It took a long time for Alex to die." Again, his eyes closed, his words grew more raspy, each syllable formed with great effort. Natalie was completely entranced.

"We spoke of many things, but never did Alex protest or question what I was forcing upon her. She promised I would be her knight forever--how ironic her words were--then she whispered my name and I kissed her...and swallowed her final breath. I held her, and as the life ebbed from her, I could feel her blood pulsing inside me, warmer and purer than any I had known. I felt--human at the moment of her death. It was far more than her blood that filled me, Nat, it was her spirit, her soul." He drew a deep breath. "In wanting to possess Alex completely, I had become possessed...by her humanity."

Natalie felt Nick's deep anguish and she saw the faint pink glassiness in his eyes. She desperately wanted to go to him, to comfort him, but she felt this would be an intrusion.

"I can't remember how long I held her," Nick said, "but Alex grew cold and stiff, and after a while I knew I was holding an empty corpse."

The young female doctor should have been repulsed, but instead she felt empathy and sympathy. She felt a pang of guilt at her jealousy as well.

Nicholas craned his neck and began again. "I vaguely sensed the sun rise and set several times, but I had no desire or need to feed. I had been satiated physically and in a way I can only describe as spiritually. Her blood stirred hot within me, my flesh was warm, and even now I can recall each taste and sensation." His voice drifted, his gaze momentarily lost in memory, a gentle smile the telltale clue.

"I still remember my elation when Alexa took her first breath, stirred in my arms and awoke as an immortal. I fed her, our blood commingled. She never questioned what happened. She never will."

'Why, Nick?" Nat asked timidly.

He looked over to his friend. "Because Alex belongs to me, Natalie. I purposely brought her over in the way that binds her to me eternally. It was the only time in seven centuries I'd blood bound another to myself, because I had always considered binding a form of slavery. She is whatever or whomever I would have her be. If I so desired, she would whore for me, she would kill for me. It was the cruelest act I'd ever committed. Yet I could not undo what I'd done, and I know I would not want it undone." The stress was evidenced in his eyes and on his mouth. "Addiction can be self-destructive, Nat." he said hoarsely. "But I don't care."

"It must have been over-powering for you to do such a thing, Nick," she observed. "But why then isn't Alex with you?"

"Partly, it's the basic distraction, partly, it's the danger of two of us trying to integrate into 'normal' society without drawing attention to our particular eating and sleeping habits. Separation also encourages both of us to seek a reversal." He added like an afterthought, "Although, it would be measurably safer to be together now that LaCroix is gone."

Natalie crossed her legs Indian-style. "Did LaCroix ever make good his threat, Nick?"

The handsome planes of Knight's face hardened visibly. "March 21, 1954, the Spring Equinox."

"You were in Chicago," the pretty brunette remembered. "You were an archeology professor, and wasn't that during the Un-American activities hearings?"

His head bobbed in assent. "The Fifties were extremely conservative. Alex and I were living in Chicago as husband and wife."

Natalie Lambert felt a queasiness in her stomach.

"It was prudent," Nick continued. "An unmarried couple--particularly an associate professor and an assistant pathologist--would not be assimilated into that sort of atmosphere otherwise. It was near-perfect. We were together, doing the work we loved the most, and we had access to research facilities for our quest. In fact, this was around the time I managed to track down the information that led me to Berlin a decade later in search of a book of majick that held a possible key to freedom. We had a modest apartment not far from the Stockyards for obvious reasons." There was a pregnant pause.

Natalie pressed on. "And?"

"People were being turned in to the Un-American Activities Committee," he said bitterly. "LaCroix turned me in and then took his revenge."

"What happened?" the doctor inquired anxiously.

His features twisted in a blend of anger and pain. "The night I was subpoenaed to testify, he'd sent an emergency message to Alex at County Hospital where she was working. She came to my office in the curator's department at the museum and he, uh..." Nick leaned his elbows on his legs and cupped his face with his hands.

Natalie grew alarmed. He looked up, but avoided her liquid brown eyes. "There was so much blood everywhere," he stammered. "LaCroix had torn her apart, physically and mentally. She'd been raped, sodomized, blooded, almost drained...it was as though he'd tried to tear her soul out." He finally looked to Natalie. "LaCroix had waited until we were 'wed', until we dared what mortals consider a 'holy union' because it made the degradation that much more victorious for him."

"There's something more, isn't there?" Her thin feminine fingers went to his hands.

In a voice tight with restrained tears, Nick explained. "He tore off her wedding band and told her she would wear it eternally. He forced it into Alex's heart, and it remains there today." He pressed his mouth to her knuckles. "Alex went quite mad. She didn't feed unless I fed her. She didn't speak. We left that night and disappeared back to England with Janette's help."

Forcing back shivers in spite of the heat emanating from the hearth, Natalie dared to ask, "Is Alex still...?"

Nick looked at her. "No, she's recovered. It took a long time, a long time; but she came back." He kissed her fingers affectionately, then stood up and tended to the fire. The lady resumed her cat-like curl on the couch. "Just like the story of Layla and Majnun," Nick told her. "Madness was the product of feeling too much."

"What is this story? It's obviously more than the Clapton song."

The vampire grinned, stoking the embers. "The original Layla was the central character in a collection of stories written by the famous Persian poet Ganjavi Nizami in 1188. See, Nat, something actually older than even me!"

She giggled.

"In the story, a young boy called Qays falls in love with Layla 'before his heart understood what it was giving away'. Qays was so completely obsessed with loving her that he is declared mad and named Majnun, which means madness. Layla loves Majnun just as passionately, but she is forced to marry another man. Their union is never consummated, and her husband dies of a broken heart.

"One evening a time later, Majnun, who had become a renowned poet, meets Layla and recites the words he's composed for her. In true romantic fashion the now-free Layla falls suddenly ill and dies before she and Majnun can be bonded together. By today's standards, the story would be considered trite, and on a level with a Harlequin romance, but it provokes strong feelings in me. Alex fell under Majnun's spell as well. I have an original copy in Persian as well as a good English translation. I imagine I read the Layla stories the way some people read their Bible."

He recited from memory for her.

"And who am I--so far from you yet near?
A singing beggar! Layla,
do you hear?
Freed from life's drudgery,
my loneliness,

Surround grief for me
small happiness
(...) Sharing your life
in all eternity
I'll live if only you
remain with me."

A fleeting sadness filtered over his face once more. "I remember reading that the night before Alexa died."

"It's quite beautiful, Nick," Natalie agreed. "I'd like to read your book sometime."

"Anytime."

"And the Clapton song--how did he become part of this small group of believers in your poet?"

Knight's mood brightened, "I guess everyone's heard of Clapton's great abiding love for Pattie Boyd, who was married to George Harrison. During the time his love was unrequited, a well-meaning friend gave him a copy of Layla's story and according to rock history, the words worked their majick on Eric and the song 'Layla' was born. For Alex and me, well, the song reflects the same sort of passion as for Eric." He grew pensive. "It's the time of year, I guess, and the music was right. So many memories keep surfacing that she's dominated my thoughts a great deal of the time."

Natalie Lambert studied the intelligence, wisdom and temporary serenity reflected in Nick Knight's face. This was the image of the person she'd come to care for deeply, and she innately knew Alexa must have shared that with her. Whatever feelings of envy, whatever fragments of jealousy she'd brought with her to his apartment, she was unable to sense now. Instead, she felt part of an intimate circle and was bold enough to ask, "Nick, do you miss her?"

He offered a smile, weary and sad. "Like I miss the sun."

As Natalie drove the Cadillac home, his words revolved in her head. She now fully comprehended the many variations of sun artwork that he'd used to dress the loft walls. He had brought the daylight and hope into his night world. Somewhere in the darkness stretching far from the Toronto skyline, Natalie knew another dreamer held a fascination with the sun she'd long relinquished to follow her knight on their eternal quest. Tomorrow, Nat promised herself, I'll look at the sun and make a wish. After all, any mortal can wish upon the moon.

Night eyes, red-rimmed and shiny, followed the doctor's departure in the vintage car belonging to Detective Nicholas Knight. Then the twin points of light flew away on the wind.

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Nicholas padded barefoot up the stairs leading to the second level bedroom. The slick coolness of black silk pajamas felt comfortable against his bare skin as he shuffled into the bedroom. The lush eroticism of Vaughan-Williams permeated the place, forcing away the rain clouds outside. Maestro had composed "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis" after much encouragement from Alex, Nick recalled favorably. They'd attended the debut together in 1921 and a hand-delivered note to Alex with a pink rose from the musician thanked her for her fidelity. He'd dedicated this performance to her. Even now, Nick remembered how the lady, gowned in simple yet elegant midnight blue, had become entranced by the completed composition. Nicholas

has been enchanted by her. His eyes never strayed from gazing at her proud profile. He would always cherish the memory of blood-tinged tears staining her pale cheeks as the melody concluded. He had wiped them away and then kissed the pinkness, becoming aroused by her taste in his mouth.

He opened the drawer of the nightstand, a place he kept special mementos. He withdrew a thickness of light blue tissue paper and unwrapped the treasure with infinite care. The handkerchief bore pastel tribute to that evening's tears, faded over the years to rust. The faint aroma of sandalwood, talc and violets provoked a quiver in his groin. Scarlet teardrops, an aphrodisiac for immortals.

Later, as Nick lay alone in his bed, the last strains of "The Lark Ascending" filtered throughout his home. He felt a wave of melancholy wash over his being. His last waking thought was whether mortal men were as hopelessly sentimental and romantic as he felt tonight. He couldn't remember.

The rain continued.

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"You look weary, Nikola," Janette cooed. She offered her full red mouth and he kissed her hungrily. His hands skimmed over her slender hips, the spandex of the black mini dress gliding smooth under his touch. No panty lines, but then, Janette was fond of no undergarments or at the least, the skimpiest of lacy thongs. He knew from personal experience.

Janette tossed back her raven waves and ached her swan-like neck as he kissed her throat. "Ah, it is a different hunger that robs your sleep, n'est pas?"

"Oui, j'ai faim." Nick replied with a wide boyish grin.

The exotic woman braced his face with her delicate hands and she studied his eyes intently. "But my love," she brushed his lips with her own, "I can see I am not the satisfaction you crave. Your kisses taste different."

"Different isn't bad." He sucked and gobbled from the hollow of her throat up her jaws to her lower lip. As suddenly as his excitement had erupted, it abated. He pressed his forehead to hers, shut his eyes and sighed. "You're right, of course. You know me too well."

Nose to nose with him, Janette peered up coquettishly. "I think perhaps your appetite is for a decidedly British repast, yes?"

"It's that time of year," he reminded her. Nick leaned back against a pillar and allowed the petite brunette to rest against him. Their movements together had become casually practiced over the centuries. The detective's attention, however, was drawn away by the noisy intrusion of a pack of young vampires, men and women, outfitted in leathers, chains, elaborate punk hairstyles and jewelry. One boy clanked onto the DJ stand and fidgeted with dials and knobs. The place screamed with the pounding beat of the Cure's "Why Can't I Be You" played at full volume.

Janette pushed herself up and came toward the dancers. "All right, settle down." She flicked her closed fan at them like a baton. They ignored her.

"They aren't yours, are they?" Nick asked above the din.

"Hardly," the female vampire replied with disgust. "We have a more civilized family."

"Who do they belong to?" he asked.

"LaCroix," Janette answered quickly.

The mere mention of his mentor's name evoked an ominous sensation in his body. "When? I mean, where do they come from?"

Bernard, one of Janette's bodyguards, barreled from the back room and his large solid build and bulldog behavior, accompanied by a few well-chosen profane words, caused the rowdy crowd to calm slightly.

"They're his angels," Janette explained. "LaCroix's fallen angels, as he called them. You know how fond he was of new young playthings."

"If they're any indication, then his taste certainly deteriorated over the years," Knight commented drily. "Are they staying in the cellar?"

She absentmindedly toyed with the buttons of his deep-purple silk shirt, all the while watching the gyrating bodies on the dance floor. "No, we have a more refined, ah, vintage in our cellars, Nikola," she informed him. "This pack hangs about rock clubs, I'm told. Once there was talk of LaCroix opening a club for them in a desecrated church somewhere. He probably found it 'terribly amusing' to toss his fallen angels into a former church, but," she tilted her pretty head to better look at him, "well, we know how most of his plans fell through, eh?"

Nick slid his arms around her from behind and kissed her neck and shoulder. "Are they unattended?"

"The tall blonde over there." Janette indicated with a nod of her head. "She seems to have assumed a vague control of them, or rather of 'the tribe' as they call themselves."

"She's pretty in a crude sort of way," Knight noted. "I can see how she might be LaCroix's type."

"He had no particular type, mon amour," she reminded him. "We are evidence of that."

He kissed her on the lips, lingering a while, and left for the station.

The decibel level rose and Janette, mindful of the hour when her regular customers would soon begin arriving, flipped off the sounds system and flushed the carousing young vampires out into the darkening street.

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The cacophony brought on by Schanke's full moon madness theory had measurably dissipated inside the Metro Police 27th precinct. It was a merciful relief for Nick Knight's on-going battle with stress and headaches as he made his way to the homicide detectives' room. Despite the neatly squared stack of case files atop his desk and his innate sense of duty to his job, Nick secretly hoped tonight would be call-free and quiet. Finish up the paperwork, put in my time, go home. The litany in his mind was a mantra. Don Schanke was already hard at work, attempting to put a dent in the paperwork. He looked up as Nick sat behind his desk. "Cap's on the warpath, partner," the dark-haired cop moaned.

"What happened?" Det. Knight asked quietly.

Don looked around conspiratorially, leaned forward and answered. "That news guy, Steve Tate, broke the headless angle on the noontime TV report. Don't ask me how he found out! Captain's having a conniption because now he's anticipating some copycat killings or a panic."

"He can't think we had anything to do with the information getting out," Knight insisted.

"Of course not," Schanke mugged, "but he's now doubly concerned that the killer will go underground, or else escalate the intensity of the attacks."

"How can the murderer escalate on a beheading?" Nick posed.

"He reminded me that Jack the Ripper became 'more creative' as he put it as his crimes progressed," the officer said. "The papers are already calling the

perp a serial killer. And there's been a lot of speculation about whether these are ritualistic killings."

"More good news," Knight muttered.

"And there's the glaring evidence that both victims were in our former cases," Don said. "Let's just hope the fourth estate doesn't make that tomorrow's headline. Otherwise there is nothing so far to tie the two women together, no common link."

"Until now," Joe Stonetree's deep resonant voice shattered their confab. They looked up in unison, each wearing the same cookie-cutter little boy expression. Del, a well-liked detective of Indian heritage, stood at his shoulder.

"Del hit the trail early this morning," the captain informed them. "And we seem to have been blessed with a bit of luck. Del?"

The tall dark-skinned officer moved forward to place his AM report on the small, uncluttered space at the seam of the double desks. Nick retrieved the folder and scanned the contents as the Indian detective explained. "It was truly a fluke in the purest sense. The victims are linked by association either directly or indirectly with that dance club LeFevre."

"Carmella DiMarco hardly seems the sort of client who hits the bar circuit," Schanke pointed out. "Our late lamented shrink, however, I can buy that."

"Right," Del agreed. "The tanning salon is right around the corner from the club and we've discovered there's a great deal of cross-pollination in their clientele--one of whom was Christine Noble."

"And Carmella?" Nick asked.

Del loosened the knot in his navy and claret striped tie. "That's the odd connection. Seems Carmella was the nanny to Hilary Hemstadt's twins and Mrs. Hemstadt is a partner in the club's ownership. Carmella had dropped off a stuffed elephant, which she had repaired on her own, belonging to one of the kids . On the night we guesstimate she was murdered, she was at the club delivering the toy because she was concerned the child would be upset without her elephant."

"And Mrs. Hemstadt didn't report Carmella missing?" Don asked. "That's suspicious in and of itself, Del."

The detective sat on the edge of Schanke's messy desk. "True enough, Don," he was quick to reply, "under ordinary circumstances. But Mrs. Hemstadt took the twins to New York City to visit their daddy for a week and she left the following day. Jim Hemstadt is a prominent interior architect and had been in the city for a month working on some major re-haul of a dinner club." He opened his hands palms-up and shrugged. "The first they heard about Carmella was on the news when they returned home a few days ago ."

Nick was about to say something when a familiar female voice behind him interrupted. "Forgive me for intruding, gentlemen, but I think you're the party I was looking for." Natalie Lambert smiled as she drew close beside Nick's desk.

"Something we can help you with, Doctor?" Captain Stonetree asked.

"Question," she proposed. "Del, is there sawdust at this dance club?"

"Sawdust?" he repeated. "Oh, yeah, on the upper street level, around the bar. I remember it now because Mrs. Hemstadt was rather vocal about how customers were tramping the stuff onto their very expensive wooden dance floor."

"Then there's a probable second connection between both victims," Natalie stated emphatically. "We found sawdust residue imbedded in the soles of the shoes of both victims. And if you two," she glanced from Nick to Don, "are

heading over to this club, I'd like to hitch a ride and pick up some samples to verify our findings."

The detectives stood up and reached for their jackets. "I think we can agree in theory at least," Stonetree announced, "that our perp could very well frequent the club and use it as a scouting ground for potential victims. Be low profile, see if there are any nightly or new members we might consider as possible suspects and for God's sake, let's keep the press out of this!" He turned and shuffled back to his office.

A new rainstorm erupted outside the station.

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The parking area was full, but Nick was able to ease the green Caddy into a spot half the lot's distance from the club's neon-heralded doors.

"Damn rain," Don swore. "I'm outta here." He jumped out of the car and turned up the collar of his trench coat, then scurried toward the club's entrance.

As Knight and Lambert dashed in his wake, the downpour turned to a sprinkle. "It's like someone just turned off the tap," Natalie remarked. "Very weird."

"Everything about this case is weird," Schanke complained. He shook the rain from his coat, then wiped his face with a handkerchief. "Headless bodies, geez..."

Nick opened the door and they were assaulted by music.

The atmosphere inside LeFevre was retro-Sixties chic: tasteful wood and stained glass, including an art nouveau stained glass dome over the crowded circular sunken dance floor. Framed psychedelic posters worth a fortune vied for wall space with cases of rock memorabilia gathered at great expense. There were plants everywhere, potted trees, and hanging by chains from the beams which supported the roof and its colorful dome. Surrounding the dance floor were levels of tables, banquettes, and overstuffed couches. There was a profusion of tie-dye, paisley and Indian patterns decorating the seat covers and the mountains of pillows scattered about. Incense snaked from burners and large colorful lava lamps were everywhere. A constantly changing light show bathed the dancing bodies on the floor.

"I feel like I've time-travelled," Natalie observed loudly over the throbbing beat of Jimi Hendrix' "All Along the Watchtower" which flooded the entire club from speakers placed throughout the place.

"Guess we shoulda wore our lovebeads, eh?" Schanke shook his head against the noise. "And to think Myra and I actually listened to this stuff. Hey, I'm off to check in with Mrs. Hemstadt."

"Sure." Nick watched the sea of bodies on the floor two decks below where they were standing. He seemed a little dazed and lost in thought.

"Hey, Knight, what's the matter with you?" Don asked.

His trance broke, and he smiled at his partner. "Just a wave of nostalgia, Schanke, that's all."

"Yeah, right, like you remember the Sixties," Schanke laughed. He lightly punched Nick's shoulder. "Sex, drugs, and rock and roll!" He melted into the crowd, heading toward the manager's office, located at the bar level.

"I enjoyed it," Nick shrugged goodnaturedly.

"So you were part of the flower generation, huh, Nick?" quizzed Nat.

"Oh, yeah, I loved it," the blonde man admitted gladly. "Height Ashbury, bellbottoms, war protests, Woodstock, the whole scene. I have very vivid recol-

lections. Especially of the band."

Suddenly the light shifted to blues and violets and deep reds and a white spotlight hit the revolving mirrored globe suspended over the dance floor. "Layla" resounded throughout the club.

"You can't escape that song, can you, Nick?" Natalie asked. "Nick?"

He grabbed her hand and squeezed tightly. "She's here," he mumbled. His gaze shifted quickly from the heavily peopled dance floor to the woman whose hand he held. There was a fevered glint in his eyes, a look of unbridled excitement. "She's here, Nat." Nick Knight was ecstatic. "I know it." He released her fingers and began weaving throughout the crowd of men and women in anxious search.

In the farthest corner of the bar on the main level, dark and isolated, a pair of intense brown eyes studied Dr. Natalie Lambert. A few seconds later a door opened and closed quickly. The stool beside the door was empty and only the red neon Exit sign held court in the deserted corner.

"Where's Knight?" Schanke appeared at Natalie's side. "Searching for his lost youth?"

The beat shifted and the melody of the song became lush and erotic. Overhead the light softened and as if by majick or design, the dance floor seemed to separate. Natalie leaned against the bannister and saw Nick stepping down on to the floor. She held her breath. His handsome face wore the look of rapture. Nat watched him cross the dance floor to where a small woman stood, her left hand outstretched. Nick accepted her invitation. He pulled the woman hard against himself. Her arms came about his neck tightly, his hands went to her full hips, their faces mere inches apart. It was as though no one else was in the room. They began to dance. Practiced, fluid, very heated. Gliding against the beat and one another, the couple met move for move, with professional precision, hands skimming seductively across one another's faces, chests, thighs, buttocks. The woman's thick, unruly hair was a wild mane of shiny, deep, straw-colored hair. Her clothes, blacks and violets, were gypsy-styled: long, fitted jacket over a bustier, a multi-layered floating skirt, knee-high heeled boots. The clothes reminded Natalie of Stevie Nicks.

Natalie felt surprise melt over her flushed pretty face. "Alex!"

"What an Alex?" Don inquired. "And what's Knight doing down there?"

"Dancing," the doctor commented. She was mesmerized by the blatant sensuality of their dance.

"Nat, that is <u>not</u> dancing," the older cop told her. "That's sex. Never knew Knight had it in him."

She watched the man and woman dance until the song achieved a crescendo and "Layla" ended. Nick brushed the lady's fingers with his mouth and led her up the stairs. They held hands tightly. They had exchanged no words.

Knight looked justifiably pleased as he approached his partner and the medical examiner.

"Ordinarily, Detective Knight, I would remind you of your responsibilities and duties <u>and</u> the fact that we are on a case," Schanke said sternly. His thin lips curled into a grin. "But it appears you've found yourself a reasonable distraction we should leave out of the report." He looked from Nick to the small woman beside him. "So's this your girl, Nick?"

The couple looked at one another and laughed. "Well, Don," Nick stumbled, "actually, this is Alex--Alexa Foxworth and, uh--" he appeared embarrassed, uneasy.

Alex, sensing his discomfort, offered her hand first to Nat and then to Don. "You must be Natalie, and Don. Nick was spoken of you both often. I feel as though I know you quite well." Her voice was husky and laced with a British accent, somewhat watered down.

"And how long have you two been, you know?" Schanke asked pointedly.

"Oh, Mr. Finesse!" Natalie protested. "That's not the sort of thing you ask a lady."

Alex found her defense amusing. "Thank you for your concern, Natalie, but I don't blush easily and I am the first to admit that I'm hardly a lady." She shifted slightly, bringing herself closer to her lover. This only served to exaggerate her lack of height. Even in heels, she stood a little higher than Nick's shoulder. To Natalie's discerning eye, they were complements--the same straw colored hair, the same faded denim eyes, the same fawn complexion. And while Nick was tall and slender, with a hard athletic build, Alexa was shorter then average and well-endowed to the point of voluptuous. Nick was always groomed simply, stylishly and elegantly, even when wearing jeans and a sweater. Alex favored the excessiveness of the New Romantics, but she wore the look well and comfortably.

"Hey, that's cute," Schanke stared at Alex's full bosom rising above the bustier.

"Are you referring to my breasts, or my tattoo, Don?" she asked coyly.

"I, I wasn't looking at them really! I mean, they're very nice--oh, shit," he actually blushed. "I mean that little bird."

"It's a bat," Alex corrected him. "And you're perfect welcome to stare all you like." There on the swell of her left breast was a beautifully tattooed black bat with violet highlights, less than two inches in wingspan.

"Don't girls, er, women get butterflies or flowers ordinarily?" he stammered.

Alex's eyes narrowed seductively. "I'm not an ordinary woman." Nick was smiling.

Nick snapped out of his reverie, and took the initiative. "Don, I think we'd better make the rounds before the place closes."

"Right, I'll take the upper level, you take the bar level and we'll meet in the middle," Schanke suggested. He pulled a small black notebook and a pen from his inside coat pocket. "I still think this is very weird, I mean, how are we suppose to ask people if they've seen anyone or anything suspicious when we don't know what kind of person we're looking for?"

Nick clasped his partner's shoulder. "You're a great cop, Schanke. You'll know what to look for."

"I'm off, too," Natalie announced. "I'm sorry we've got to abandon you, Alexa, but--"

"Duty calls, I know," the second woman said. "I'll just wait at the bar until you're done. All right, Nicholas?" There was rapt adoration in her eyes, Natalie observed. He brushed his fingers across Alex's cheek and nodded 'yes'. There was a sweetness to the gesture. It hurts to watch, Nat told herself, but in a nice way.

Alexa sauntered toward the door. The odor assaulted her viciously as she neared the seat close to the exit. It was overwhelming. Her stomach lurched, her knees buckled, and she slid against the bar, clutching the railing to steady herself.

"Alex!" Natalie called to her. She rushed forward, but Nick was swifter and he caught the woman in his strong arms. He pulled her close, her head

against his shoulder.

"Over there," the woman said hoarsely. "The scent...it's so, so overpowering. Can't you smell it, Nick?"

"Now I can," he wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Are you going to be all right?"

Natalie was solicitous. "When was the last time you fed, Alexa?"

"Two days," the vampire told her. "It's been two days." Nick shot her a reproving look. "I'm sorry, I was travelling," she apologized. "I'll be fine." She pulled herself up and away from Knight and regained her composure. "I'm just fine," she repeated emphatically. "I just wasn't prepared for the smell."

He started for the exit. The sweet odor was powerful as he reached the bar release. He withdrew his service revolver, poising it upwards at the ready, then looked over his shoulder at Nat. "The smell of fresh blood," he told her grimly. "You'd better track down Schanke quietly." He pressed open the door with his shoulder and stepped into the still wetness of the alley. Alexa followed in silence.

The blonde detective began searching for the source of the blood scent.

"Here, Nicky," Alex stood beside a large trash container. "Up there. She's still warm."

Nick Knight pulled himself up next to her and peered above the dumpster. He was reviled by the headless female torso who had been elaborately hung by her dainty ankles above the garbage container. Her partially clad torso bore lines of scratches or cuts, not deep and hardly bloodied. The corpse's head had, like the previous victims, been wrenched off. Gore and shredded strings of muscle and skin evidenced chaotic violence, and as in the other cases, the victim's head was not to be found.

Grasping the edge of the dumpster, Alex pulled herself up to better examine the headless body with a physician's expertise. "Something..." she said under her breath. Her face wore a question mark.

"What?" he asked. "Do you see something?"

She eased herself down, brushing the soot from her palms. She maintained her thoughtful look as she said to Nick, "Something...obvious...the scratches, I think." She moved away as the exit door opened and Don and Nat came on to the scene. Don's gun was drawn.

"Don't tell me," Schanke grimaced. "Another one?"

"Above the dumpster," Nick motioned with a nod of his head. He replaced his gun in the holster under his jacket and withdrew a small cellular phone. Angrily, he punched in 911 and when the dispatcher came on line he demanded, "81 Kilo, this is Knight, get Captain Stonetree." He watched as his lady stood near a darkened doorway. She seemed to be looking for something on the ground. The toe of her left boot pushed rubbish and debris carefully, Nick saw with concern. He was about to call out to her when his superior came on the line.

"Captain," Nicholas Knight reported, "we have a third victim."

Within twenty-three minutes the club was sealed, the perimeter was secured and the crime scene had been invaded by policemen, technicians, wailing sirens, red and blue flashing lights, and the powerful presence of Joe Stonetree.

Alex slid into the back seat of Nick's Caddy unobserved. She opened the handkerchief in her hand and studied her treasure. It looked like a common large silver and rubber pierced loop earring, the style favored by heavy-metal fans. The small hatchet dangling from the chain was, on the other hand, high

quality surgical steel that had been sharpened to razor-like edge. Etched on it were runes she knew well.

The blade was bloodied.

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The rain, which had cooperatively stopped during the investigation of the crime scene, began again as the squad cars cleared from the alleyway and the area surrounding the dance club. A fine steady fall washed away whatever remained of the murder. "You boys get your prelims done and call it a night," Stonetree ordered his men. "It'll be a free-for-all tomorrow after the press smears the morning edition. I'll expect both of you ready when your shift starts." He climbed into a plain gray unmarked sedan and started the engine. "Damn," was his final word. Joe's round face evidenced the angry frustration he and his officers felt. The car pulled away from the curb with a splatter of mud and rain.

"He is <u>not</u> a happy camper," Schanke remarked. "We are deep in it if we don't find some solid clues soon, Nick."

"We'll find something soon, Schank," Nick said wearily. "I have a strong inkling there are obvious answers we're overlooking. Look, it's late. Let's get back to the station and..."

"Nick, listen," the older man said in an unusually gentle tone. "I'll do the report. You catch up with Natalie at the morgue, then get that little lady of yours tucked in for the night." Don craned his neck toward the Caddy. "You deserve a break, take it from a happily married man." He winked. "Hasta la bye-bye!" Schanke splashed down the alley to a squad car waiting for him.

As he climbed into his car, the rain came down harder. Nick Knight gunned the monster engine of the Cadillac and eased out into the street. He switched on the radio, tuning down the volume of the Eagles' "Take It To The Limit." Nick's blue-toned eyes were framed in the rear view mirror. A heavily-lashed identical pair of eyes smiled seductively back at him.

"I've missed you," Alexa Foxworth murmured. "Some parts more than others."

Nick laughed softly. They sang the chorus together as the car wove through the deserted rain-drenched streets.

While Nick was busy telling her about the murders, Alex felt an incredible urge to curl the longish locks at the nape of his neck around her fingers. But she resisted.

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The odor was unmistakable from the atmosphere of any morgue in any big city. The cold density of chemical sterility melded with a potage of dead flesh and medicinals. Morgues all sound alike, the same chilled tappings, whirrings and metallic slidings, periodically interrupted by hollow footfalls and garbled voices. Hands locked together, Nick and Alex walked silently down the corridor leading to Natalie's office. It was empty, save for the barely audible hum of the cheap television perched on an empty cabinet top. They went to the forensics theatre next door.

Natalie Lambert, familiar white baseball cap pulled down over her thick ponytailed hair, was doing the initial examination of victim number three. She looked up, waved a scalpel, said a few words into the overhead mic and switched off the power.

"So, what do we have, Nat?" Nick asked, as he approached the partially draped torso on the table. Alex began circling, observing.

Natalie gave up a sigh. "I can tell you the victim was approximately five foot six and three-quarter inches tall, Caucasian, one hundred twenty-four athletic pounds--giving a slight variant for the missing head--in good health, and in her mid-twenties." Another sigh. "And not much more than that. I'm hopeful fingerprints will establish her ID."

"Any ideas on how she was beheaded?" he asked.

"All I know is there is no evidence of a tool or similar object being used, and let's fact it, Nick," the pathologist pointed out, "no human being could tear off a head like this."

He opened his mouth to speak, but was silenced when Alex, standing opposite the doctor and cop, said, "She's right, Nick, no human could do this." They looked at her in unison. "But I could, and so could you, Nick."

He was struck dumb.

"Wait a minute!" Natalie exclaimed as she drew up beside the other woman. "Are you implying that a vampire is responsible for these murders?"

"Yes," she affirmed.

"Don't talk crazy, Alex," Knight retorted hotly. "There's no proof."

She shot him an unwavering look, but directed her questions to Natalie. "The victims sustained massive blood loss, yet the crime scenes haven't yielded the amount of blood consistent with this sort of violence--correct?"

"Yes, but we've been having heavy rains every night there's been a murder and one victim was found in a body of water," Natalie countered.

Ignoring Nick's glare, Alex turned her attention back to her fellow physician. "Each victim's head has been torn off right-to-left, indicating more tearing and damaging on the left side. In fact, your autopsy has revealed a sizeable portion of each throat missing. Correct?"

"Yes," Nat answered cautiously.

She picked up forceps and indicated a section of fleshy remnants, veins and muscles, close to where the missing section was. "If you look here, you can readily see how the most brutalized area is tangent to the jugular. Have you checked for saliva?"

"I'm not certain," Nat examined the wound with renewed interest. She bent forward to better examine the shredded flesh and tissue. "This doesn't really coincide with biting though..."

"But it is consistent with indiscriminate tearing not unlike the way a trained guard dog rips out a throat," Alex advised. "The tearing was done to cover the true method of death--vampire assault. The heads are trophies and the removal also complicates identification, and serves to prevent the victim's resurrection. As for the torso maiming...something, I dunno, it's like I was saying at the crime scene, there's something about these cuts I should see." She looked up, away from the body, "Natalie, are the other remains available for viewing? That is, if you don't mind?"

"Not at all." Nat was enthusiastic. "Right over here, shelf 3 and shelf 5." She pulled the drawers out and peeled back the gray drapery from each headless corpse.

"All right, that's enough!" Nick yelled. He confronted Alex across the massively charred female body. "Alex, dammit, what in hell's gotten into you? These can't be vampire killings, do you hear me?"

"Nicholas," her voice was controlled, "I am a doctor and a vampire, and in

my professional opinion on both counts, I believe these murders are being committed by a renegade."

"This isn't enough proof and it's not likely your testimony would be acceptable, much less believed by anyone outside this room," he insisted angrily.

Natalie looked from one to the other and prayed she'd not be acting as referee if tempers escalated.

"I have more proof," Alexa finally said.

"What did you pick up in the alley?" he demanded in a manner that startled Natalie.

She produced the blood-stained hanky from the pocket of her jacket and opened the corners to reveal the silver and black earring. Alex noted the instant recognition in Nick's face. "Proof enough?"

"There could be a lot of earrings similar in design, Alex," he told her tersely. "It doesn't necessarily mean it's one of theirs."

"The runes on the hatchet are right and it was freshly bloodied when I found it. This was used to make those scratches on the woman's body. I'm convinced blood analysis would confirm that."

"Excuse me," Natalie broke in. "What's going on here? Would you mind letting me in on the secret and are you saying that you removed evidence from a crime scene, Alex?"

"I had to," the shorter woman said.

"You had to," Natalie repeated. "Mind telling me why?"

"Because that earring, if the blood analysis is positive, would be absolute proof that the murderer is a vampire," the blonde doctor explained. "I was trying to protect the community. It's instinctual. I'm not apologizing for my action. But as Nick said, no one is going to believe a vampire is killing women and beheading them."

"You've put me in a position of jeopardy then," Nat was angry. "I have a responsibility as the metro pathologist to make judgments based on all evidence, and yet you're telling me I can't use this evidence because it directly endangers Nick, you, and others like you." She cast a reproving look to the detective. "Nick, what's your opinion of this dilemma?"

He looked closely at the inscribed runes of LaCroix's name and 'famille' on the metal of the earring. There was no denying its parentage. He rolled the earring back into the fabric and palmed it. "I'm afraid Alex may be right, Nat. This is a Dark Angel earring, no question about it."

Natalie tugged off her baseball cap. "Dark Angel?"

"Do you remember I mentioned a band back at the club? Well, we actually had a band called Dark Angels back in the 60's and 70's. We were all part of it--LaCroix, Janette, Alex, Reggie, Damian, me--and we did travel with the Grateful Dead...and we were at Woodstock."

"So you're telling me one of your band members is the serial murderer?" the ME asked.

"Not likely," Alex interrupted. "The band was dissolved long ago. Damian was destroyed in a fire twenty years ago, and Reggie was last reported down in Rio chasing pretty young boys. LaCroix is gone and you can eliminate us as well."

"What about Janette?" Nat asked.

Alex groaned. "Oh, the bitch queen! No, no, she never soils herself, and she hasn't survived this long by being as overt as the one doing these murders. It's most likely one of LaCroix's pets, one of his most current young playthings.

He had a penchant for pretty boys and girls and gave the special ones copies of the original Dark Angel earrings. Stylishly punk."

"But what's the motive?" Natalie asked them. "Vampires try and hide their presence, yet this series of beheadings indicates anything but undercover activity."

"Someone gone renegade," Nick replied. "Someone is either crazy or on a vendetta."

"Or both," came Alex's addendum.

Grace, a large, pleasant, black technician swept into the room with her customary cheerfulness. She offered a folder to Natalie. "Hi, Detective Knight."

"Hello, Grace," he returned her smile. Alexa fell back into the shadows.

"The results you wanted," Grace commented. "We've got a positive ID on each victim now which should especially interest you, detective." She glided from the theatre.

The examiner pursed her lips, shaking her head. "Victim three: Magda Delacoix. Wasn't she involved in the phone sex case?"

He sat on the edge of a desk, his shoulders slumped. "Yeah, Magda. Nice person, very spiritual." Nat thought it to be an odd commentary. Nick continued. "They're all my cases, Nat."

"Damn!"

They turned towards Alex, who stood beside the latest victim's body. She pointed at the burnt body of Christina Nobel. "Death by 'the sun.'" She moved to where the second body lay, bloated and grayed by water, Carmella DiMarco. "Disfiguration by 'holy water' since the pond is technically on hallowed ground." Her hand made a wide sweep of the last victim. "It's been right in front of our eyes, Nick, look! The scratches and cuts form upside-down crosses. A vampire can't tolerate crosses, of course, but reversed, we can. Also, the victim was strung up in a mock crucifixion. And there is the aspect of being a dark angel, an angel to the darkness. More quasi-religious references." She came toward the dark-dressed man. "There's a renegade on a blood hunt, Nicholas, and I think you're the intended prey."

"Nick, could she be right?" Natalie edged on panic. "Who's doing this? Don't you people have rules or something, or can vampires just do anything they want?"

"There are very serious laws, Natalie," he told her firmly. "We exist by the Code."

"We're punished by the Code," added Alexa. "Staked, decapitated."

"Oh, dear God," Natalie whispered. Her knees felt weak.

"God has nothing to do with it," the female vampire retorted as she carefully draped each body and pushed the drawers back into the vault. "Nick?"

"Hm?" He'd been lost in thought. Even before she could say the words he knew and dreaded her question.

"Is LaCroix truly gone?" The words fell like a lead weight.

He pulled himself to his full height and took a deep deliberate breath. "I saw him destroyed by my own hand, Alex...but right now, I'm not certain of anything about this case."

She shortened the distance between herself and her lover. "You've felt it, too, haven't you, Nicky? Felt...'something' tugging like a hidden string inside..."

"Janette asked almost the same exact thing not long ago," he mumbled.

The cold silence of the morgue cracked when Natalie hesitantly asked, "What if LaCroix wasn't destroyed? What if he is here, now?" She paused, bit her lower lip nervously. "What would he do to you?"

Nick's face appeared haunted. His mind was a playground for dark dreams. He held his counsel to himself.

They were acutely aware of the clicking of high-heeled boots on the hard floor as Alexa turned away and walked toward the area beneath the skylight. She looked up at the storm pounding on the tinted glass window. Her voice was unnaturally calm. "He would not be so kind as to stop at mere rape," she said. "And madness would afford no security."

Thunder rattled the window panes. Dr. Natalie Lambert shivered as someone walked across her grave.

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They drove to Gateway Lane in silence, save for the steady sliding of wipers on the car's windows and the hum of the huge engine. The storm renewed itself with ferocity. By the morning rush hour the streets would resemble rivers, there would be citywide flooding, several schools would be closed and the traffic patrol would be giving serious consideration to resigning en masse.

There was no physical closeness between them now. Nick, his thoughts divided between the gravity of the serial killings and the feasibility that one of his own kind was the perpetrator, wore a face of pensive concern. His neck was knotted and the headache threatened to erupt again.

Alexa sat primly against the passenger door. She stared into the driving rain as she looked into the tempest of their past.

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The woman was faintly aware of angry voices and physical violence and breakage, though she was unable to decipher if the noises were outside the remnants of her body, or phantoms in her broken mind. She felt softer, gentler hands on her now, a kind feminine voice cooing to her in French and in English. The voice and the hands belonged to the same being, someone with large dark eyes and flowing black hair and full red lips. I should know you, the victim's mind strained for recognition, but I know nothing...save the terrible truths he raped my mind with...ripping apart the illusions of Emily and the pretty ballerina and the woman called Janette...and my lover, my golden knight...

She heard her violator's terrifying voice just beyond her mental grasp. She cowered on the floor in a darkened corner of the office, tugging feebly at the ugly gray drapery to cover herself, cover her brutalized body...there was so much blood everywhere, the smell overpowering, and the sickening odor was strongest of herself...she fell forward, retching blood--his and her own--into the oriental carpeting. The dark woman moaned, came beside her and ministered to her.

"Look at her, Nicholas," the demon voice said spitefully. "Pathetic bitch. She's useless and now she's quite mad." He wore a self-possessed smear on his pale visage. "I have never comprehended your sentimental attachment to it. I'll not have you that way."

"I hate you, LaCroix." Nicholas Girard faced his mentor fearlessly. "I'm going to kill you."

"Good, very good indeed," the tall, gaunt vampire was delighted at his accomplishment. "You're coming around, Nicholas." He readied to leave, buttoning his cuffs. "But I strongly suggest that you make haste in leaving this place before the security patrol does their nightly rounds. You're already in questionable standing with the university and a further scandal of this magnitude would never do." LaCroix smoothed the front of his bloodstained shirt. "You will remember to toss that trash on your way out, won't you?" He laughed insanely.

Through gritted teeth, Nicholas asked, "Why?"

The laughter stopped abruptly. LaCroix became a pillar of ice. "I told you. At a time of my choosing." He drew near and Nicholas could smell her blood on the man's cold breath. It was foul. "Betrayal is a bitch," LaCroix seethed. His fingers ran across the deep oozing gouges the girl's nails had etched in his right cheek. He smeared the blood on Nick's beautiful face. "And now the bitch is mine," he sneered.

Nicholas' heart was enraged, but he bridled his anger. "Then know, LaCroix, at a time of my choosing, your destruction will come by my hand."

The ancient vampire's fingers swiped across the blond professor's lips, leaving blood like lipstick on his mouth. "Better and better, Nicholas."

The hollow mad laughter exploded again, then blissful silence. LaCroix was gone.

Her tousled head rested against the lovely woman's breast...she looked up into a pair of very familiar anguished blue eyes...she wanted to escape to the peaceful place promised by his loving eyes...instead she was imprisoned by impending madness, unable to speak.

Her last cognizant thought was a fervent plea...never to be voiced for over a hundred years.

Then she, too, went away and even his sweet eyes could not beckon her home.

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They'd come home. Still in absolute silence. Nick cut the engine, got out of the car dragging her large carpetbag out of the back seat before locking his door. Alexa waited patiently at the loft's door, a heavy-laden leather satchel slung over her shoulder. He punched in the door code and ushered the woman inside, out of the driving rain.

Uneasiness permeated the dimly-lit apartment. Nick left the bag on the floor near to the breakfast bar and he dropped his jacket on one of the bar stools. Alexa let her bag thud to the floor beside her luggage. He placed a large glass wine goblet on the bar and filled it with chilled blood from one of the bottles stored in the fridge. He slid the glass toward her. "Drink," he commanded. Their eyes locked, the fever flinted and sparked.. Nicholas watched intently as she took the glass in both hands, brought it to her generous mouth and drank deeply. He saw a slight flush rise on her cheeks and a satisfying glaze film her pale eyes. Her lips were rouged with blood, inciting his desire. She caught a ruby droplet on her tongue, rolled it back and savored the richness in her throat. Nicholas drank from the bottle greedily, but his hunger churned unabated. Alexa placed the goblet on the counter and when she spoke, her voice was husky with pent-up emotion. "You haven't touched me since we danced, Nicholas."

He drank again, draining the bottle. It clanked in the sink as he turned away from her and the room was plunged into silence again.

"I've angered you," she apologized painfully. "I never meant to, I only wanted to help and I know I should have kept my place and not told Natalie my theories and..."

"I didn't dare," came a broken response, "I didn't dare touch you," he repeated hoarsely. He faced her slowly, rawness in his throat. "I couldn't trust myself to, Alex."

Her heart pumped wildly from the heat of the blood, her yearning was heightened. Alex rolled her shoulders gracefully to free herself of the velvet jacket she wore. It flounced to the floor at her feet. "You can dare anything with me, Nicholas."

A new dance began, a courting dance that was slow, provocative, and passionate.

Nick rounded the divider as he removed his shoulder holster and laid the weapon on the breakfast counter carefully. "I could dare many things, Alex. You should know that."

They circled one another, only their eyes caressing, deliberate in their physical abstinence. She stepped out of the boots easily, diminishing her height greatly. He smiled at the sound of a zipper opening. A moment later her skirt floated to the floor like black ruffled puddle, leaving her in garments not unlike those of the night they first met. Nick's fingers touched the remote on the table before the chair he sat down in. The logs in the grate sparked, then lighted, bathing her in the fire's glow as she glided closer, pausing only to retrieve the glass from the bar...she moved gracefully toward the fireplace, fully aware of how the flames would gild her curves and highlight the untamed glory of her amber-colored hair and the stray curls uncovered by the lacy string panty...Nick's arousal was evident, as was the glint of hunger mirrored in his blue eyes as he feasted on the sight of her drawing nearer, the cup clasped in her hands raised to the level of her chest...the heat from the hearth raised a fine patina of sweat at her pulse points and the bat tattoo on her breast shimmered, fluttered...she sipped from the goblet, her eyes began to glow more golden and her mouth wore a deep scarlet hue...she pulled closer still, then dipped two fingers into the cup and anointed her throat and her cleavage with a slash of glowing red...he could smell her--the blend of sandalwood and violets that was her signature scent and the intoxicating brew of blood and her musk--as the pounding in his veins intensified, his canines, like hers, began to emerge...

Alex straddled his legs by kneeling on the seat cushion and she eased her body down, pleased at the way he responded to the pressure...an involuntary soft groan of pleasure escaped his throat...she placed the cup on the side table, ran her fingers over the brim, then pressed her bloodied fingertips lightly to his mouth...he licked the liquid heartily, causing her to swoon and move her hips slowly to excite him...her hands rested on her thighs and she studied him through half-opened narrowed eyes, peering through a tangle of hair. "Dare not to touch me, Nicholas," Alexa challenged breathlessly.

A knowing smile curled Nick's mouth. She'd led the dance long enough. With a suddenness that caused her to gasp, he grabbed the front of her bustier with his right hand, a handful of her hair with his left and pulled her face a breath away from his. "Bitch," he bit savagely into her mouth, his tongue assaulting hers, the life's blood mingling with their saliva...her hands made short memory of his silk shirt and dark trousers as buttons popped and material ripped and then his dampened skin was hot against hers...she lifted up slightly as his greedy mouth traveled the scarlet trail she'd painted down her

neck and chest, he nibbled and sucked at her flesh and the blood and adeptly freed her of the insignificant ribbon panty and lacy bustier...he clutched her ass and pressed her to himself...her legs came about his waist as he brought both of them into the rug before the fireplace...Nicholas reclaimed every fragrant curve and hollow, every silken hair and fleshly fold, spurred on by Alex's hands in his thick blond curls, her heels locked at his waist and her nails raking across his damp back as he slid into her...he made her whimper and pant and cry out in unbridled pleasure, and only when he knew he'd nearly crested their passion did his eager mouth retrace the path of blood from her open mouth, down her pulsating throat to her left breast, firm and throbbing in his palm...Nicholas threw back his head, willed his fangs to extend fully and with joyous abandon his canines pierced the tender flesh on her breast--her back arched, trusting every part of her body, every fibre of her being more intimately to his as her sweet rich blood fountained down his throat. She gasped his name when they convulsed ecstatically...then somehow they dreamily touched the earth again, still tightly wrapped around each other and momentarily satiated.

Nick raised himself up. His straw-gold hair fanned in boyish disarray as he eased his hips forward and the woman instinctively tightened her muscles to keep him clenched to herself. Every woman is achingly beautiful glistening with sex, he thought. Alexa opened her large heavy-lidded eyes, her wide full lips wet and parted, an invitation that prompted him to lovingly bruise her mouth again and again. "So much for foreplay," Nicholas whispered into her ear. He bit her earlobe.

A seductive low laugh trebled up Alex's throat and she managed to take him off balance and roll him onto his back. Astride him, she crawled against Nick, ever mindful of how willing his body responded to her movements. Her long waves fell forward when she brought her mouth savagely down on his, her heavy breasts grazing his chest. She pinned his wrists outstretched to the rug with her hands. In between kisses, he said, "I dare you," over and over.

Her nails raked his arms, his shoulders, the soft golden curls at his breastbone. Alex's large eyes narrowed when she withdrew her lips from his, albeit reluctantly. Their eyes never strayed. She began to lick her cheerful way down his throat, chest, stomach, all the while her fingers played lightly against his skin, stroking his sweat-slick flesh with feather-like determination.

Nick's eyes were unable to focus as the pleasure intensified and his lover's mouth and enthusiasm grew more demanding. He closed his blue eyes and gave up a weak grunt, then a satisfied moan.

Noontime the following day, the sun fiercely attempted to break through the gloom and storm clouds, and they had yet to get to the bedroom.

****

Wearing dark glasses in spite of the late hour, Det. Nick Knight navigated the squad room, shuffled to his desk and flopped into the chair gracelessly. He crossed his arms and buried his face.

"Oh, have we had a hard night, detective?"

Nick straightened up, eased out of the black leather jacket, then stared across his neatly arranged desk.

Don Schanke leaned forward, removed his partner's shades and he grinned mischievously. "Did you get <u>any</u> sleep?" he asked fraternally.

"Not to speak of," Knight stifled a yawn.

"Do you expect to wear that shit-eating grin all night?" Don chided further.

"Probably," Nick's smiled broadened.

Schanke shook his head, rustled some papers and chuckled. "She's a nice lady, Nick," Don commented. "Even if she is a vampire."

Knight was fully alert. "How did you know?" he asked nervously.

The older cop tapped a ballpoint pen to his own neck. "Telltale hickey, Knight," he smirked. "Don't think I've had one since high school."

Relief flushed Nick's body. He gingerly touched the swollen bruise on the left side of his throat where her fangs had pierced. By tomorrow there would be only a blemish. "Alex gets carried away," he explained sheepishly.

"Hey, whatever!" Schanke shrugged. "What's a little blood-letting between consenting adults, right?"

If only you knew, Nick said inwardly. He busied himself with work and made a valiant effort not to fantasize.

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"Hello, anyone home?"

Natalie Lambert peered around the left door. "It's me," she announced shyly. Stupid move, Nat, she scolded herself. You're just being nosey.

"No, you're not, please come in, Natalie. I've nearly finished," came a refined British reply.

The lovely doctor walked toward the center of the loft and watched as Alexa went through a series of deliberately slow and quick graceful movement, her large hands moving all the time. She wore a loose-fitting black gi. The vampire stopped, did several breathing exercises to cool down. "Hi."

"Hi, I didn't mean to interrupt," Nat said, "your...exercises?"

"Kata," Alex corrected her. "Very ancient. Stimulates and body and strengthens it, balances coordination, improves fighting skills and helps the mind, which in my case is my strongest defense."

"What an odd thing to say," Natalie commented. "Vampires are immortal and vulnerable to so few things. I've witnessed Nick defending himself and he comes away looking fairly invincible."

Alex paused at the breakfast bar. "You really don't know about me, do you, Natalie?" Seeing the confusion scrawled on the doctor's features, she went on. "Hasn't Nicholas told you about me? That I've never taken a life, that I've never hunted for prey?"

"No, he never said anything. I assumed that you were alike," the brunette replied. She slid into one of the barstools and she seemed keenly interested in this new knowledge. "So you've only taken animal blood?"

Alex rolled her shoulders nonchalantly. "It is what Nicholas preferred for me." She observed a hint of feminist disdain on Natalie's face. "I do so willingly, Natalie. I have never relinquished my free will although I am obedient to Nicholas' desires."

"Because of the blood binding?" she asked.

"Exactly," Alexa replied. She placed her large hands palms-down on the formica countertop and Natalie recognized the power in them. They were a woman's hands, to be certain, but they were hands which had worked hard at a wide variety of jobs, genteel to common. Alex's face, like her hands, was etched by an age Nat judged to be in the mid-forties, which would make her older in mortal years than Nick. She wore her age without vanity, or pretence, and with a minimum of makeup. But Alexa was clearly intelligent, proud, and

strangely serene in her condition. Though she was unable to fathom why, Natalie felt safe with Nick's lover and felt no jealousy at their long-term commitment. She was, however, entranced by her personality and was curious to know how this rather plain-looking, unimposing, eccentrically-dressed woman could so totally captivate Nick Knight.

"I've often wondered that myself," Alex answered with a gentle smile.

Nat's furled thick lashes blinked. "Do you always do that? Read other people's minds?"

"I'm very sorry, Natalie," the vampire said sincerely. "I had not intended to cause you discomfort, but I must admit that you are gifted with a most remarkable mind. Very fascinating in one so young. Little question why Nicholas has kinship with you."

"How can you tell what kind of mind I have?" the physician asked her.

"I don't quite know how to explain it," she began, "but you see, I take of the mind instead of the blood. It is what I am, what Nicholas would prefer for me. You lose nothing, but I gain knowledge, which for me is the life--and by using the accumulated knowledge, I can adapt to survive and protect myself from attack." She offered a conspiratorial smile, "And before you ask, no, I can't control Nick's mind, though I have been known to play there from time to time, much to his chagrin." Theirs was a warmly shared laughter.

"I'm glad we had this opportunity, Alexa," the younger woman said effusively. "Although I was a little intimidated after the way Nick spoke of you."

"Oh, I'm hardly intimidating!" Her bounty of hair bounced as she laughed. It fluffed in pleasant disarray around her face and shoulders. "People usually assume I'm non-threatening because of my stature and that's fine by me. I try to avoid confrontation whatever and whenever possible. That is my way, not Nicholas'," She was quite emphatic.

"You and Nick." Nat chose her words delicately. "You seem so much alike, and yet vastly different that I, I wonder what silver thread ties you to one another so completely. It seems to be something far greater than your blood binding."

"Yes, far greater." Alex's eyes caught a glimmer of mysticism. It vanished in a moment. Her look was now enigmatic. "Samskar." The word flowed out like a whisper.

"What?" Dr. Lambert leaned forward.

Alexa's face radiated spiritual calm and oddly this did not seem blasphemous to Natalie. "Samskar," she said again, with reverence. "The indelible impression left by past action, from the Sanskrit. He and I branded one another at our first encounter and according to ancient belief, Samskar extracts an unbreakable promise of responsibility...a oneness of purpose and being while retaining our individuality. It is irrevocable, whether rooted in goodness or evil."

Nat was humbled by the gravity of her words. Her voice was tiny when she spoke. "I never realized the depth of your love, Alex."

"We speak not of love. Humans know love, we do not." A tired smile brought crinkles to the corners of Alex's eyes. She reached across the tabletop and affectionately touched Natalie's smooth warm cheek. "Sweet child, falling in love with Nicholas would be an easy task for anyone. You should know that." She felt the heat of a blush rise in Nat's face. "And Nick returns that with enthusiasm, for friends, and lovers alike." Now her long fingers held the young woman's chin tenderly. "There is, dear Natasha, something more intense than

love or hate. Touched by Samskar, our vision was clarified; we learned the secret of the human heart. To want love is inborn, to seek it comes naturally. But the secret...the secret of the human heart is to find the one other soul who feels so deeply that he would defy death for her." Wetness welled in Natalie's brown eyes. "It is why Nicholas bound me with a kind of vampiric purity...it is why I joyously gave him my death."

The vampire gazed longingly at her companion's lovely face, made all the more luminous with tears. "How I do envy you your tears," she said cryptically.

Nat sniffled and removed a tissue from her jacket pocket to dab at her eyes. "Why do you say that, Alex?"

"Because your tears are crystal clear and wonderfully human. Mine are stained with blood and very terribly inhuman."

Resolutely, Natalie reminded her, "When you become mortal, many things will turn back."

"Then as a fellow scientist, my dear doctor," Alex informed her, "it will interest you to know that there have been times of late when the scarlet has become pink!"

"Really! This is very encouraging. Have you told Nick? Do you have data?" She had a myriad of questions.

"Whoa! Slow down, please!" she pleaded. "We should sit down and compare our notes carefully. As you already know, there are any given number of variables to temporary changes in the vampire's existence. Like Nick and his now infamous french fries and catsup!"

"I was very encouraged by that," Natalie said proudly. "I only wish that the feeding change had sustained itself, but the blood addiction erupted when he found himself pressured and stressed."

"You attribute changes to organic, emotional, or mental states," Alex pointed out. "But in my experiments and from personal experience, metaphysical or spiritual influences are equally, if not more pronounced, instigators in affecting a human change, albeit temporary."

"Nick has broached the concept of a fall from grace with regard to maintaining the cure, but as a scientist," she was cautious, "I have great doubts that the application of charitable works and self-sacrifice for the common good can radically change someone under the curse. I still firmly believe the answers are in the lab."

"Than how do you explain the changes in me?" Alex sounded very much like Dr. Foxworth.

Natalie was most inquisitive. "For instance?"

"I can tolerate the sun for far greater periods than Nick. And while I experience physical unpleasantness, I can hold a cross, freely enter religious places, and even engage in consuming a limited number of foods. Nick feels intense pain and sickness, while I feel temporary nausea. Then again," Alex ran her fingers through her very long hair, "Nicholas fell a lot further from grace than I did, so the climb up hasn't been as tumultuous for me."

"Forgive my impertinence, Alexa," Nat was defensive, "but that sounds very egotistical on your part, and vanity has never been a virtue as I recall."

"Ah, Nicholas does have a champion in you!" She clapped her hands together happily. "And I am so pleased. On the other hand, being realistic, you have misinterpreted. It is not a matter of qualitative goodness, Natasha, but rather how far from goodness one was strayed. I was, in my mortal time, a fallen woman, an unwed mother. But Nicholas was a consecrated knight, a

holy crusader who had taken vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to the Holy Church. He carried tonsure when LaCroix brought him across. He was a great prize to the Master."

Tonsure?" the brunette asked.

During the ritual of investiture, a novice kneels before the local bishop, professes his intention and takes his vows, at which time a small patch of hair is clipped from the top of the head. That is tonsure, the outward sign of the vows. You've surely seen artwork of Francis of Assisi. His hairstyle, while exaggerated, is also tonsure. On the day Nicholas of Brabant became a knight, he also received tonsure and upon his return from the Crusades, he would have laid aside his sword and been ordained."

Natalie's dainty fingertips braced her cheeks. "I'm completely awed. I never knew."

Alex continued. "In 1228, when Nicholas was seduced by Janette and brought over by LaCroix, he was not only a man of honor, title, and chivalry, he was pure of mind, body and soul. The perfect sacrificial lamb at the altar of Lilith." Her tone was spiteful, terse. "The Knights Templar were founded around 1118, charged with the protection of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the protection of pilgrims to the Holy Land, and later, the minting of money all along their pilgrim route. The were the creme de la creme of the Church. They were also prime for seduction into darkness. Travel abroad had proven fruitful in many ways and they became wildly powerful and wealthy. LaCroix had been highly influential in the ultimate perversion of the Templars. Nicholas had been his prototype. He later became LaCroix's cohort. He was beautiful, noble, and most of all--pure. After his fall from grace, Nick and LaCroix whored, debauched, and fed their gluttonous way through Europe, the Middle East, and later, the New World."

"What of the Templars?" Natalie asked.

"They were excommunicated by the Pope when they refused to give up their power, land, and loot. It was around 1312, I believe. Among their sins were rape, torture, murder for hire, slavery, pedophilia, sodomy, bestiality, necromancy, sorcery, and alchemy. Oh, yes," she snapped, "and there was that ever persistent rumor of vampirism." Alex wore a look of disgust at the memories. "LaCroix's Red Death traversed time and place. And even now, the plague infects us because one of his Dark Angels is turning the night streets crimson with death."

Hypnotized by Alex's melodious vocal history, Natalie had become fixed in rapt attention until a loud thunderclap made to bolt to awareness. "That's some story," she demurred. "I think I can see how the gravity of one's sins can affect the attempt to surmount the curse. The deeper the fall, the harder the climb, is that it?"

"Samskar," Alexa affirmed. "On the dark side."

"It all revolves around purity, doesn't it?"

"Pure evil consumes goodness, pure goodness triumphs over evil," the vampire stated. "Nicholas has spent these past decades trying to atone for all of his sins by righting wrongs, protecting the weak and guarding..."

"That kingdom?" Natalie volunteered gleefully.

"Yes, the kingdom," she conceded. "He has become a true knight once more." There was great pride in her words.

The rain pelted against he windows. "Alex, teach me," Natalie beseeched. "Teach me that I might heal this iliness."

"Mortui vivos docent," the small woman said.

"Latin. Sounds vaguely familiar." Natalie was unable to remember the source.

"You have probably seen it over the door to the autopsy room when you attended college," Alex gently reminded her. "It's common place to the pathologist's domain."

Her doe-like eyes were wide and anxious like those of an eager student. "What does it mean?"

"Mortui vivos docent," Alexa Foxworth translated. "The dead teach the living."

****

"I think this is a foolish sort of revenge," challenged a petite slim redhead called Gogo. Her given name was Margot, but she'd lost a syllable along with her virginity when she joined the tribe. "There's got to be a better way, Vixen."

A tall, lithe woman dressed in dramatic black skins and silver studs stepped into the pool of light afforded by the street lamp. Her cold amber eyes never strayed form the illuminated windows of Knight's apartment. Her platinum hair was shorn flat on top and at the sides, the back was square cut and long to below her shoulder blades. It was the female equivalent of her lover's hairstyle. She also retained all of LaCroix's icy elegance and his imperious bearing. "It has to be duly completed," Vixen responded. "Deliberate by design and execution."

"This is not a word to bandy about, Vixen," Charles said boldly. "Your revenge is drawing far too much attention to the tribe. The press is making it headline news. Need I remind you about the existence of empirical proof?"

The impressive blonde shot her companion a reproving look.

"Or the consequences to those responsible for that proof?" he concluded.

"Need I remind you of the solemn vow to avenge LaCroix?" she spat back at him.

"Your oath, Vixen, not the tribe's." He would not be swayed. "You endanger all of us by this reckless behavior. And remember, Nicholas Knight is an ancient. He has privilege and far greater experience."

"Perhaps," she said, "but I have unquenchable passion and hatred because I was blood bound to LaCroix."

"So was Nick Knight," Gogo interjected. Vixen's low growl caused the girl to scoot closer to Charles for protection.

"Stop it, Vixen!" commanded the male vampire. "She's just a neo and you know she speaks the truth. Others have warned you that you are flirting with your own destruction. Make an end of this senseless reign of killing before Knight--or worse, the Enforcers--make an end to you."

"I'm not afraid," Vixen stood with her chin raised defiantly. "I must do my lover's bidding."

"Does that include following LaCroix to vapor?" Charles asked sharply.

She had the face of the hard-edged fanatic instantly. "What would you know of the love and passion LaCroix and I shared?"

For a fleeting moment, a sweet memory, a young memory, reflected in Charles' green eyes. "I loved you once so completely that I willingly followed you into eternal darkness. I remember when you were still Mary Alyce."

"My name is Vixen!" she nearly shouted, eyes aglow with madness.

"Yes," Charles assented. "The name given to you by your dead lover and we all know that foxes mate for life."

"For unlife," Gogo nervously mumbled.

Vixen ignored their protestations. "His woman, I want his woman and I want him to forfeit his existence for hers. I have carefully begun unraveling the facade of Knight's pseudo-mortal life as a policeman, just as LaCroix wanted. Soon people will become suspicious of his lifestyle. They will question his culpability in these murders, and after one more act directly relating to his work, I will take his woman and make him grovel for her life. Then vengeance will be mine--and LaCroix's." Her voice had reached a fevered pitch.

"The woman is very strong," Gogo reminded the statuesque female. "She knows Nick Knight intimately and she is very intelligent. You're in for a deadly confrontation."

"You could be destroyed," Charles added.

The platinum blonde regarded the pair. "It doesn't matter what happens to me. My existence ended with LaCroix's, but if I am to be destroyed, I'll do everything in my power to destroy Knight and all he cherishes."

Charles slipped on a pair of black leather gloves. He looked at Gogo, who nodded affirmation. He addressed Vixen. "Then if this is your intention, it ends here. The tribe withdraws from any further connection with your vendetta against this ancient." He brushed his gloved fingertips against her white cold cheek. "I followed you into darkness, Mary Alyce, but I will not follow you into oblivion."

Vixen's eyes narrowed. She stepped away from his touch. "So mote it be."

Gogo and Charles flew up between the industrial buildings and it was quiet in the alley, save for the constant piddle of rain against dumpsters and puddles. Vixen, a remarkable image of black and white save for the slash of scarlet that was her mouth, stepped into the street and looked up at the lighted apartment. "I'll drain your blood and I'll eat his heart," she promised the feminine silhouette posed before the frosted windows. Then Vixen, too, was gone and only the rain and wind spoke to the sidewalk and street.

****

Some ten minutes later, the two women left the building. Natalie fumbled with her car keys, then managed to unlock the passenger side door. Alex, carrying a 9 x 13 Rubbermaid container, stood poised at the curb. Her senses were piqued. She smelled a trace of a scent, she sensed the presence of others.

"Alex?"

"Another," Alexa told Nat. "More than one. I smell Poison."

"You can smell what kind of poison?" Dr. Lambert demanded.

"The perfume, Poison," Alexa clarified. "I picked up on it at the dance club and it was on the earring as well. They've been here, Nat. Other vampires. They're closing in on Nick."

Alarmed, Natalie's eyes grew wide, her voice agitated. "Isn't there anyone we can call for help? Isn't there anyone who can protect Nick?"

Alex's half-smile was wry. "Well, I hardly think we can call 911 and there aren't that many vampire private investigators."

"I'm being serious, Alexa!" Natalie insisted.

"So am I!" Alex countered. "We can't draw any more attention to ourselves. There are very specific rules regarding proof at play here and the players are dangerously close to making speculations about Nick's involvement in the crimes be just that kind of proof. The result would ultimately be his destruction."

"How can you be so cavalier when you speak of death and destruction?" an astonished Natalie exclaimed. "You're a healer, Alexa, that should stand for something. You claim that this man means a great deal to you, yet you seem resigned to accept whatever Fate deigns." She tried to steady her nerves. "You're so damn calm, but I'm terrified."

They climbed into the vehicle. Alex's face was inexplicably complacent. There was no tremor in her voice. "I accepted death as my existence a century ago, Natalie, so the concept of finality does not frighten me, nor does pain. If I allowed that fear to override my mind, I would probably go mad--and I've already been down that snake pit and crawled back. You must trust me, Natasha," there was conviction in her voice, "trust me when I tell you that Nicholas is not defenseless and that I would give my death again to protect him. You must have faith, doctor," she admonished. "Faith is a strong weapon against evil."

"Alex, what you said before," Nat felt slight foolish, but her curiosity was burning. "Are there really vampire PI's?"

Alexa's laughter was hearty. "Well, actually, yes! In fact, I have a dear friend in Chicago who was brought over during prohibition. Lovely man, infectious sense of humor--he's a private detective and..."

The sedan lurched away from the curb.

****

"Hello, romance! I think you've got company, Nick!" Don Schanke said to his partner.

"Huh?" Nick's head jerked up, and he looked over his shoulder. A smile washed across his attractive features as he stood up. All thought of paperwork evaporated from his thoughts.

Alexa Foxworth walked beside Natalie Lambert, and again Schanke noted how short the blonde was. He was intrigued by 'Nick's girl' as he thought of her. Alex never walked into a room, she strutted gracefully. She was all impossibly long hair, full lips, abundant curves poured into dark denim bellbottoms. She wore a black Harley jacket several sizes too large which he surmised belonged to Nick, and she wasn't wearing a bra. No wonder Nick looks like something the cat refused to drag home, Don thought wistfully.

Alex offered her mouth to Nick immediately. It was a deep kiss. She bit his lower lip before pulling her face away from his. Nick's smile was permanent.

Offering the large Rubbermaid container to Don, Alex said. "Thanks for making my homecoming happy, Don."

Schanke examined the plastic ware carefully. It was quite heavy and still felt warm. "What is it?"

"Best way to a man's heart is through his stomach," she coined the cliche. "I made cheese pierogi."

He snapped open the vacuum seal and was treated to the freshly steamed little doughy pillows swimming in a rich creamy gravy flecked with golden chopped onion. Schanke looked like he'd just had an orgasm. "Oh, they're still warm." He allowed the smell to intoxicate him. A fork magically appeared from his desk, and he speared one, popping it into his mouth.

"Well?" Alex was hopeful.

Don swallowed, set aside the fork, rose from his chair and rather abruptly caught her off-guard, bent her back and planted one extremely sloppy kiss on her. "Perfection!" he said. She couldn't stop laughing.

Score one for our side, Nick thought to himself.

Schanke returned to his dish. "You know, Alexa, skinny guy like Knight can't appreciate your culinary talent. I propose we run away, open a storefront restaurant in Saskatchewan and spend the rest of our lives blissfully happy."

"Gosh, Don," she stammered sweetly. "All that from pierogi. It boggles the mind to even imagine what you might have offered if I'd brought...kolachy or cabbage rolls."

Schanke groaned. He looked plaintively at his tall partner. "Please, Nick, I'm begging you. Make this woman stay here forever! Chain her to the stove for the sake of my sanity!"

"Sorry, Schank, she's very independent and I can't force her to stay." Knight was enjoying this.

"You're cruel, Knight, vicious and cruel." Don pouted between bites and swallows. "I'll make you pay for this."

The presence of authority flooded the office as Captain Stonetree lumbered in with a roll of newspapers under his arm. Nick affected the proper introductions, and Joe, while customarily cordial to Alex, was distracted. His bulk dwarfed her, his smile genuine but strained.

"If you'll excuse us," he addressed himself to Alexa, "something vital has to be discussed. Nick--Schanke--I'd like to see you both in my office."

Schanke wagged his finger under Natalie's pert nose after he closed the container. "They'd better all be in there when I get out," he said in mock menace. He closed the Captain's door after stepping inside.

****

"Problem, Cap?" Nick asked immediately.

Joe tossed the papers on his desk where they unfurled to reveal dreaded headlines. All were indictments of poor police work and each loudly decried the on-going rampage of Toronto's serial killer. "Courtesy of the commissioner, gentlemen," he informed them. "I was just reamed every which way till Sunday about the ineffective handling of these murders, and most particularly about the piss-poor way my two best men are <u>not</u> doing their jobs. He was emphatic about this page one story. Especially regarding the connection between your case file and the victims."

Don grimaced as he looked at the hazy, though sensationalistic, color photo of the most recent victim dangling over the dumpster. The caption in the <u>National Inquirer</u> proclaimed: "Headhunter! Dead End at Disco! We reveal the secrets the cops don't want you to know!"

"I'll just bet," Schanke grumbled.

Joe growled. "There's an especially titillating article on the inside page about the questionable lifestyle of one Nicholas Knight."

"Me? But why?" Nick's hostility was instantaneous.

"Because, as the column points out," Stonetree explained. "The victims are all unattached women and because you're young, single, with no known family or social contacts, and with an extremely private side. People love gossip and someone's tipping off that rag to print crap like this. They're intimating you might not like women at all. Anyway, it's enough to start people talking and people tend to fear what they don't understand. Ignorance is not necessarily bliss, Nick. I don't have to remind you of that. You both should be aware that unless you come up with something positive in 48 hours, you're being pulled off the case and placed on suspension."

The partners groaned with displeasure.

"Any idea who the snitch is, Cap?" Schanke asked.

Joe eased his bulk into his leather chair. "Not a thought. Nick, any suspicions? Anyone who has reason to besmirch your reputation?"

Before Knight could reply, Don said. "Well, it's gotta be somebody who knows you pretty well. Listen to this: 'Reliable sources are quoted as stating that Knight is known to frequent an elite private club called the Raven...' and it goes on to say that the clientele is unusual. It suggests it is the site of devil worship and a heavy drug trade. But, our informant also points out that both Magda and Christina frequented the Raven, as did Alyce Hunter." Don's head bobbed up. "Now that's scary, Nick. Only you, Natalie, Janette and I know Alyce followed you there after the museum break-in."

Nick felt his carefully constructed world crumbling all around him.

"Who else could have known about Alyce?" Schanke asked again. "Who else was around back then?"

Only one other, Nick Knight thought bitterly. Only one other who was capable of destroying him.

But LaCroix was gone. He has to be, Nick kept repeating in his mind. Has to be.

****

Alexa Foxworth shuddered as an invisible thread pulled infinitesimally taut. When Nick emerged from the chief's office, his beautiful face was blemished by an uneasy dose of anger and worry. The line yanked tighter still. In the privacy of the loft she could have attempted to salve the hurt, to soothe the concern. She made eye contact with him. Let me in, she projected into his mind, and Nick didn't withhold all of the darkness churning inside his brain.

I don't want to have to leave again, he telepathed.

You can't leave them unprotected, my knight, she said sternly. You have an oath to be fulfilled. I can help.

He braced for the inevitable. It had been a century in coming.

Free me, Nicholas, she begged. Free me to seek out among our own what you need. I can go where you should not, and I can learn from their minds. You can't isolate me forever. In your heart you know this is our truth, our Samskar.

From where he stood near the office door, Nicholas Knight raised his face and captured her gaze with a steeled look. "Alex," he said aloud. "Leave."

She floated across the length of the office and stopped before him. Her hands went to his bristly cheeks with gentleness. She raised herself up on her toes to kiss his mouth chastely. "Vous et nul autre," Alexa told him softly. *You and no other.* She spun on her boot heel and, with hair streaming in her wake, Alex fled the noisy commotion of the squad room to the humid silence of Toronto's night side.

Natalie Lambert reappeared and was surprised to find the area nearly deserted. "Where's Alex, Nick?"

He was still watching the empty space where the vampire had been standing.

"Nick?"

"She's on a quest," he told her truthfully. "But, Nat, I feel as though I've just condemned her to the Pit."

****

The Raven was more crowded than usual as people attempted to escape the continuing rain. Janette, lithe and elegant as always, wore a black form-fitting frock that flared at the hip into a skirt of carwash strips, black hose and stiletto black heels. A wide choker cinched her swan-like throat. She was perched daintily on a stool at her customary spot at the end of the bar. The lady dragged on an ebony holder and a cloud of cigarette smoke swirled above her half-full wine glass. Familiar lips brushed her bare shoulder and she smiled. "Ah, the prodigal returns." The dark-tressed woman swerved around expecting to see Nick, but on seeing Alexa, her perfect face brightened like that of a schoolgirl. "Alexia!" she squealed, as she embraced her friend. "You have been naughty, chéri! You have stayed away too long and Nikola has pined for you." She held the small woman at arm's length. "You are staying, n'est pas?"

"We shall see." Alexa was cautious.

"But you are in my club not for friendship alone, I think," Janette discerned. "Your eyes appear disquieted."

"You've felt the tug, haven't you, Janette?" Alex was blunt. "It's becoming more pronounced."

Impatiently, Janette puffed at her cigarette. She smashed the half-smoked cigarette in an ashtray. "Oui, yes. At first, I thought it was merely an unsettled feeling, all too vague to take seriously. But now...now it is more definite. Alexia, the magnetic bond that held us together should have been broken with the demise of LaCroix, yet not is seems..."

"Resurrected?" Alex volunteered.

"Poor choice of word, my pet," Janette commented drily. "But, oui, the pull is returning."

"Like puppets on strings," Alex said absentmindedly.

"What was that?" Janette asked over the pumped up music.

"Something LaCroix said the night he, that night he..." she fumbled painfully. "In Chicago."

"You remember? No, you can't remember." Janette was appalled.

Alex's eyes were steady and clear. "Oh, yes, I remember it all, everything, Janette. All the dreams he punctured, all the fantasies he destroyed. And in my madness I learned the truth of the lie which was LaCroix."

"You were raped, Alexia," the dark woman recollected. "Trauma like that never goes away." She held her friend's hand fondly. "Let it go, my pet, it's over and so is LaCroix."

"No," Alex challenged. "Women survive physical rape. It's the mental rape I'll never forget. We're all feeling it--you, Nick, me, how many others? And what of these atrocities, the beheadings--you know as well as I do that a renegade is behind the crimes and with each attack, the pull on each of us is stronger. It's like the violence is feeding off the power, generating something vile like LaCroix."

"Now you are talking like a madwoman, Alex!" Janette's voice raised angrily. "You suggest that LaCroix is directing this violence from his grave, if he had one."

"I think he's exerting influence, Janette." Alex's fingers curled around the other's wrists. "Even you don't know, don't fully comprehend the depravity of his evil. He is the puppet master and he still has tight rein on the strings attached to all of us. He might not have remained so powerful if you had assumed your place 'en famille'."

Enraged, Janette pulled her hand free. "How dare you sit in judgment of me!" She walked toward the private room in the back of the club. Alexa followed. Inside the room, Janette whirled about and in a quick movement she snapped open the antique fan she favored.

Alexa flinched, then weaved at the gesture. "Please...don't..."

"You insult me, I who carry the blood of the ancients! And then you ask favors!" She used the fan furiously. "You truly are mad, Alexa. Nicky should have kept you locked up."

"The truth is always frightening," Alex said. "But then you've fled the truth by becoming an immortal, and being immortal won't save you if this renegade isn't stopped quickly. The papers are already mentioning this club."

"You're babbling like we're in the middle of a conspiracy. Do you realize how insane that sounds?" Janette asked. "A conspiracy among the immortals, instituted by a vampire. Really, girl, I think all of those drugs you and Nick experimented with in the 60's are flashing back in your head." The fan moved in sharp quick strokes, a clear indication of her anger and outrage. "And toward whom is all of this directed, may I ask? Who among us is being targeted by your theoretical conspiracy of terror?" she demanded hotly.

"Nicholas," came the reserved answer.

Janette threw up her hands in dismay. "Of course! Nicholas! I might have known."

Diminished by Janette's fury, Alexa sat on the edge of a banquette bench. She studied the muddied toes of her boots.

The club owner paced the floor, high heels clicking, clicking. "Always with you, it is Nicholas. The moon shines a little less bright because he is feeling sad. Everything large and small is dependent upon him, according to your gospel, dear Alexia. And now a serial killer, a lunatic with a fondness for ladies' heads, is stalking the streets, murdering on a directive from LaCroix for the singular purpose of destroying <u>your</u> Nicholas! Is this your conspiracy?"

"Yes." The reply was barely audible.

"And, of course, you have appointed yourself his protector and now you are trying to draft me into marching alongside you, yes?"

"I had hoped..."

"And, of course, your theory is right?"

"I'm certain it is..."

"And is this because you know Nicholas better than anyone else?" the fan snapped shut. "Is this because you believe he has been faithful to you all these years just as you have been faithful to him alone?"

Silence.

"Mark my word, Alexa, you are not the great love of his life," Janette pronounced harshly. "You will never replace the veneration he holds for his angel, his ballerina."

Suddenly, Alex burst out laughing, softly at first, then with increasing hilarity. A stunned Janette reared back as the other woman eased off the cushion and came toward her.

"You truly are mad," Janette gasped.

The laughing ceased as quickly as it had erupted, and surprisingly, Janette realized that her friend was in total control. "Not any more," Alex stated flatly. "Yes, let us finally talk of Nick's precious ballerina." Her words sounded spiteful.

"I've always known it," Janette told her. "You're jealous because she was and is perfection to Nikola."

Her voice was tight as she brought her face very close to Janette's. "I could shatter Nick's illusion about her like that!" She snapped her fingers and the raven-haired vampire blinked. "I could destroy many fantasies with what LaCroix told me."

"Of course you can." Janette fanned herself again.

"You're forcing me to tell you a great deal of truth, my sister, and you have never been open to such reality. I strongly advise you to heed my warning," Alex told her.

Primly, Janette slid onto a barstool and prettily crossed her long legs. "Oh, please, do go on. It's been--ages--since anyone told me a faery tale."

"This is no faery tale. It's the truth born from my insanity." Alex was smiling, a confident smile. "For over a hundred years we have all pacified this fantasy of Nick's about his beautiful angel. We've revered her memory like a holy relic. There's always been an unspoken rule among immortals never to speak of her lest we hurt Nicholas."

"True enough," Janette acknowledged. "Nikola felt strong enough to tell me the story a short while ago and it was exceedingly painful for him."

"I'm certain it was," Alex replied. "LaCroix wanted it to remain painful for all time."

"Conspiracy again!" Janette's lyrical voice elevated.

Alex ignored Janette's outburst. "When he related the story, did he mention a letter the girl had been holding when he finally went into her dressing room?"

She shrugged carelessly. "I think he mentioned it in passing. but I don't think it was anything of significance." Her pert head tilted in question. "What it?"

"That letter was forged by LaCroix, presumably written by Nicholas, promising her a great deal, including a rather lucrative contract with a British ballet company," Alex related. "You already know how LaCroix's two vampire associates mesmerized the little thing into believing she was in love with Nick--it all happened quickly, sooner than LaCroix had planned, so she hadn't been quite fully conditioned, for lack of a better word. Nick always thought it was sweet and charming that she fumbled with his name. The plain fact is that she barely knew it. They hadn't placed the suggestion firmly enough. His angel, who was at best a competent dancer--I'd seen her perform, and frankly, she was very beautiful, but merely average--well, she had won her prima ballerina status be becoming the lover of one of the ballet's more generous patrons. That gentleman was preparing to supplant the angel with another fresher model. Nick's forged letter came at a most beneficial time, Janette, and it promised the security she craved."

The ancient was defensive. "Regardless of what you say, Alexia, Nicholas has never loved anyone as much as he loved her. You surely know that. He will never forget her."

"Well, then my love, if she was such a paragon of perfection and his one true love, why is it after over a century of this reverence, none of us can even remember the girl's name?"

The consternation brought on by so harsh a reality flustered Janette. She was contemplative, straining to pull the dancer's name from her memory. "It's true...I can't remember her name..."

"And neither can Nicholas," Alexa added. "I've seen inside his mind and all his memory recalls is the vision of purity LaCroix wanted him to see. The pathetic little thing was a pawn to lure Nick, lure him into violence and back

into LaCroix's favor. A pawn like Erica, Alexandra, nameless others...and you, and me." She crisscrossed the small room, back and forth on little cat feet, as she spoke. "LaCroix has never desired anything as much as he desired Nicholas. The ballerina may have been Nick's vision of purity, but Nick truly was LaCroix's pure prize. Each of us fulfilled our parts in the continuing seduction. It's all puppetry and Lacroix manipulates the strings." Her expressive hands were gesturing with much animation as she paced. Janette's wondrous dark eyes followed every step, every gesture. "Tell me of the first time you saw Nicholas. Describe your initial glimpse of him."

She talked as if reliving a dream, which she probably was. There was a dreamlike quality to the images she conjured up. "There was firelight," Janette remembered with a lovely smile. "Many candles like a choir of white flickering lights, and an inviting fire in the large hearth. Nikola entered with a cadre of knights. I heard his voice first, very clear and melodic. He wore a dark cloak and hood, his back was to me. I remember the cape falling away and he turned and all that firelight was behind him...his golden curls were kissed with light, his skin shimmered, and I thought how absolutely flawless he was, how beautiful...he was neither man nor boy, rather a preternatural creature who did not belong on earth...gowned as he was in a white tabbard, Nicholas was all white and gold and bright--like an angel, all wrapped in a purity of..." Janette's eyelashes fluttered rapidly as though someone had tossed ice water in her face.

"Purity like an angel." Alexa felt the burden ease from her shoulders. At long last someone else could see the truth. "The two running themes in LaCroix's control over us. Destroy purity, corrupt the angels."

"It is so complicated that it is simplicity itself," Janette observed.

"Each of us bears responsibility for keeping tight LaCroix's tethers," Alex began speaking once more. "You took Nicholas's purity, his virginity, but LaCroix took his soul. I stole Nick's allegiance and offered hope, LaCroix raped our dreams. The dancer? She offered the illusion of paradise and purity, but LaCroix--in order to bind Nick to him--happily condemned Nicholas to betrayal, death, and eternal guilt."

"LaCroix destroyed the Abarat, the Mayan cup, and our beloved Erica's vibrant spirit. He wouldn't let Alexandra die and I don't have to remind you of his perversion of Daniel. In the few years Nick has been living in Toronto, LaCroix's evil has guaranteed repeated confrontations for Nicholas. He's made certain that the past--the indelible impression left by past action..."

"Samskar," Janette's voice was raspy with emotion.

"...has assaulted Nick and forced him to manifest his vampirism to protect himself and others. Backsliding has kept him from regaining his mortality. LaCroix will use anyone or anything to keep him and he is ruthless with women. That night in Chicago...while he was on me...in me...hurting me...he told me everything and he saved the most painful for last...the puzzle piece that made me go crazy."

Janette shifted uneasily in her seat. "What did he tell you, cheri?"

"You know, I've always found your fondness for mementoes endearing, Janette, a lingering fragment of your own humanity," Alexa said. "So many souvenirs, so many memories...the locket with a lock of Nick's hair, the amber earrings from Sophia...that cigarette holder that grenadier gave you, the choker you wear to cover the permanent scars that LaCroix ripped into your throat...and the fan.."

Janette held the lacy black fan in her hand, wondering.

"Do you remember where you got it?" Alex questioned.

"Long ago, London, I think," she responded.

"Do you remember the two little girls, one in a blue pinafore, auburn hair, blue eyes?"

Janette's memory jelled clearer. "I...I think I do..."

Alexa Foxworth's face was ribboned with scarlet teardrops. Her voice cracked. "LaCroix told me how you lured them, promised you'd have your carriage bring them home...it was getting dark, after all, and it was her mother's birthday...and the fan...the fan was the gift she'd found for her mummy--you incredible bitch! You murdered my daughter! You...you took her blood and you stole her life and then you took the only thing she had to give me!" Alex was shaking as she cried.

Janette trembled, disbelieving, yet knowing she spoke the truth. She felt sick.

"Do you know what I thought about when they put me away, Janette?" Alexa asked her through the tears. "I tried to think of how many ways I could destroy your perfectly beautiful face and still let you live. I thought of everything I knew as a doctor, all I knew as a vampire, and how I could kill you over and over and over for what you stole from me. I wanted to rend you apart as savagely as LaCroix had ripped at me, and then I wanted to do it again and again, for as long as eternity."

"You must believe me, Alexia," Janette whispered. "I didn't know, I couldn't have known."

Alex puddled to the floor like a ragdoll, a little broken marionette. "I know...but he knew, he discovered the truth which he kept until he could kill me with it...he will stop at nothing to have his way--you see that now, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," came the soft reply.

"You owe me a life for Emily's, Janette," Alex demanded. "And I will be repaid."

A thousand years of supremacy, a thousand years of perfection. Janette's fingers quivered around the folded fan. A vain souvenir became her only flaw. This night she was a little less perfect.

Many moments faded away, they sat in silence. Puppets with broken strings, angels with clipped wings.

****

He held her frail body as she sobbed, her head pressed to his shoulder, her tears dampening his shirt. He rocked her in his embrace, cooing words of reassurance, telling her she still had great worth, that he would always care about her, care for her.

Just before dawn, Nick Knight pulled the Caddy into the parking space outside his apartment. He crossed his arms over the steering wheel, pressed his face to the pillow of his arms. The weight crushed his spirit and his body. He hadn't wanted to leave her alone. She had no one else and the demon who had visited her in the dead of night to terrorize her knew...knew Bernice had fought a battle with her own mortality and youth and how she had survived the ordeal of acceptance, a little grayer, a little slower, a little closer to the grave...

The shape had had no face, no gender. IT came in darkness and promised perpetual youth again...promised pretty young men to ravish her body, promised picture-perfect images in the mirror...if only she would lure Nick

Knight for the dark spirit--but Bernice proved stronger than the entity had expected...it fled and once alone in her small apartment, the old woman shakily telephoned the detective...to warn him...

She'd been strong...until age and weariness swept over her worn out frame and the bravery dissipated into tears and she'd collapsed in his strong protective youthful arms...

"Mea culpa," Nicholas whispered to the rising sun. He tried to watch dawn as long as he was able.

****

The scent, a mere waft, was on his jacket. She gathered him in her arms and the smell trickled into her nose lightly. He told her where he'd been, of Bernice, how he was sorry their time together was marred by so much violence. The stuff men tell their women after work.

The violence, the world, all darkness disappeared when they poured into one another, when they made love.

****

Night came a little too rapidly. Everything was picking up speed as though the entire essence of what was alive was rushing headlong into all that was dead. She'd waited, planned, carried out her Master's bidding. Vixen sat before the cracked mirror and painted her pretty face, warpaint for the battle. She smugly smiled back at the icy image in her looking glass.

"Do I please you?" she asked the wind.

The wind howled and she laughed madly. The rain continued, colder with fog, a dense covering of thick lake mist carried on the arms of the frigid wind.

****

The Vaughan-Williams rippled through the loft as if carried on the wings of a sea breeze, a gentle wind that cuddled and warmed the flesh, that freed the mind of the darkness that threatened pleasant past thoughts. The breeze of music rolled across her the same way he covered her with caresses and kisses and poetic words. Alexa rested her bed-tousled head against Nicholas' chest. Her hands, always moving, always exploring, skimmed over the planes and hollows of his body, as though she was memorizing him, committing him to memory.

"Why do you do that?" Nick asked. He pressed his mouth to her forehead. Her hair smelled clean and fragrant, her flesh smelled of him, of them together.

"Why do I do what?" Alexa asked as she looked up at his face.

"Why do you seem to 'memorize' me? It's not like you don't already have a very intimate knowledge of my body, Alex," he smiled lightly.

"You'd laugh." She scooted back down and snuggled against him.

"No, I won't." He meant it, he'd never lied to her.

Alex licked his chest as she now eased herself across him. "I'm finger-sculpting you, Nicholas. I have no discernable talent for art, but if I did, I would paint and sculpt and draw you many times over. It's a fantasy I have." She sat up, straddling him, completely absorbed in his beauty. Her fingertips traced the lines and bones of his face, his strong jaw, the waves and curls of his shiny golden hair. "So very beautiful," she whispered.

"You've never asked for anything, Alex," Nick said, as his hands explored her rounded hips. "You have a right to ask for something I cannot deny. Bound to me, you have that right."

It was the right time, the time to drop away the chains of the past, the time to banish the nightmares. She hesitated, wanting the words to be absolutely right. "There is only one thing you can promise me, Nicholas," came the quiet words. "Only one thing."

He looked impossibly wonderful and that alone was a distraction. "Ask," he gently commanded.

"Promise that my existence will end as it began...in your arms." The pent-up words flowed out on the melody of her composer friend.

"Alex...Alex." Nick tugged her face down to his by grabbing handfuls of her hair until his mouth was on hers. "Alex, I can't promise that." He kissed her again.

Her eyes revealed hurt. "Was it wrong of me to ask?"

"No, not wrong." He brushed his lips across her eyelids, kissing through a tangle of red-tinted blonde hair. "Just unnecessary." He saw the confusion revealed on her face. "I can't promise something I gave you freely the night I crossed your threshold." He'd brought a smile to her generous mouth. "Better," he said with admiration. "But would you promise me something, Alex?"

"Anything." She was eager, happy.

"Then promise that you'll never allow me to be free of my addiction to you." Before she could respond, he bit into her mouth and devoured every part of her.

****

"Yeah, this is Nick Knight, I'm either asleep or incommunicado--leave a message at the tone."

Click.

"This is the lab calling for Detective Knight. Dr. Lambert would like you to stop by around eleven. She has some pertinent new information regarding your most recent case. Thank you."

Click.

Alexa Foxworth felt uneasy. Something wasn't quite right about the message. Nat wouldh ave called the station, or stopped by, or...

She literally flew out the door.

****

The telltale smell lingered in the chilled morgue air, the sweet heaviness of Poison fought with the medicinal odors. The place looked deserted. Alex searched the office and then the autopsy room. There was no sign of her friend, except for the tumbled instruments, an overturned stool, no evidence she had been there. The vampire moved silently, looking for any indication of what had happened. A gust of chilly damp wind swept down from nowhere and splattered autumn raindrops on her face and hair. Alexa's head jerked up. "Oh, no," she muttered. Glass crunched beneath her boots.

The skylight was broken. Natalie had been kidnapped. A maelstrom of Poison blew skyward.

****

Before going to the Raven, she went back to the loft. There were several things she needed. Alex caught her face in a mirror. One could easily read the fear in her eyes. Fear not of what she felt compelled to do, but fear of what would be lost if she was successful. She leaned against the door, breathing

hard and rapidly as a wave of nausea and hunger roiled through her entire body. She'd never hunted before, but the methods were instinctual and she carried the wisdom of many immortals in her mind. Natalie was the line barrier, and if she was breached, Nicholas would fall prey to the renegade on this blood hunt. Alex took the jacket from the closet, saw something else in the back hanging on a peg and...

A series of beeps distracted her. Nick was retrieving his messages. Then his honey-toned voice. "Alex, if you're there, pick up. If not...well, no words...something, I wanted to tell you I think you're right. I've felt that tugging all night. Whatever is happening, it's not your imagination. Gotta go to the lab and see Nat. See you in the sheets." A double click.

It was there, a strong magnetic pull deep inside, and the rope kept getting stronger and more taut. She could feel her hands and feet move by manipulation now...like a puppet dangling from strings. She grabbed the thing in the back of the closet, took his extra keys and wheeled the Harley into the wet alley.

****

Janette was prepared for her arrival. She wasn't prepared for her news.

"Who is it, Janette?" Alex demanded. No overtures of friendship, no hellos. "Natalie has been taken." The words hung in the air. "Whoever it is, is calling Nick out, it's going to happen tonight."

"Her name is Vixen," Janette reported dully. The fan was in absence for once. "She was LaCroix's last lover and the child over there," she motioned to a tiny redhead nervously standing against the wall, "said this Vixen is mad. She talks as though LaCroix is telling her what to do, and she is determined to extract revenge on Nikola for what he did to LaCroix."

Alex cleared her throat. "Where is she, where could she had taken Natalie, Janette."

"Gogo, the little one, said their tribe has been hiding out in a desecrated church in Chinatown which LaCroix had planned to turn into a heavy metal rock club," she explained. "I don't think much was completed before his destruction, but it would seen that it is the likely place Vixen would take Natalie. It's called the Pit."

"Why am I not surprised?" Alexa Foxworth was curt. "The son of a bitch just keeps on controlling things!"

Janette's hand went to her friend's arm. "Alexia, is Natalie worth this? She is, after all, human and you would be going against your own. They'll come for you if it goes awry."

Alex sighed. "Why? Oh, Janette, you still don't see. When Nicky becomes mortal, it will not be for the likes of you or me. He will turn to someone like Natalie, someone never made impure by the taint of vampirism. He can't afford the emotional guilt of another ballerina and besides," she covered Janette's perfectly manicured fingers with her own, "it's time I take my place among my own kind."

"If you're able to succeed, Alexia, you know LaCroix will have won," Janette reminded her. "If you spill blood, you, too, will lose your purity. You won't be different and I don't know if you could live with that sort of guilt."

"I may not have to," she said flippantly. "Everyone knows the Enforcers are near because this entire spree of Vixen's has caused too much attention to be focussed on us. I'll take my chances. I've got very little to lose anymore and I can't let..." She hung her head and Janette embraced her affectionately.

"I will do what I can to keep anything from happening to Nick," she guaranteed. "I do, after all, have a rather long time, vested interest in him."

They smiled at one another.

"You're really not the hard bitch you'd have everyone believe," Alex observed. "You have a terribly obvious streak of sentimentality, Janette. One might say it was almost human."

"Again you insult me," but Janette winked. "You feel it, don't you."

"Yes," came the terse reply.

"So do I," Janette's words clogged in her throat.

Their fingers wove together for but a moment, then Janette stood alone in the back room and she considered the future.

****

Schanke and Knight knew immediately something was wrong. Grace, Arthur, the rest of the staff were off for the evening. It was the one night Nat worked alone every other week.

"Someone inside, Nick," Schanke said angrily. "Someone with access to the schedules. What the hell is happening?"

Nick Knight's face was drawn tightly. "Schank, call Stonetree and tell him what happened. I'm going to check Nat's apartment and mine." He began running down the corridor.

"Where do I meet up with you? Hey, don't run out on me, Knight!" Don yelled out.

He stopped at the outside door, calling back down the gray corridor, "The Raven."

"Naturally," Schanke mugged. "Shit." He grabbed the phone.

****

There was the eerie glow of neon behind the stained glass windows, throbbing metal resounded and she could hear it on the street as she cut the engine of Nick's bike. She wondered if perhaps she wasn't still crazy. The control of kata took over and she deepened her breathing, momentarily shutting her eyes and feeling a fine rain pelt her face. Use what you know, be what your are. Hope you're not too late.

The belltower. Alex flew up.

****

Only Sidney, Natalie's black and white cat, was there to welcome Nick. The tom rubbed against Nick's hand, butting his large apple-shaped head against Nick's palm. He meowed, purred, then pouted when the man left. Sidney resumed his Buddha-like curl in his favorite chair and waited for his mistress' return.

****

There was a confrontation below, yelling, shoving, juvenile behavior. Alexa scanned the sanctuary, now the stage, banked by glaring red neon proclaiming "The Pit". Most of the religious windows had been removed save for a few--ah, of course, LaCroix had kept only the ones featuring angels--the other windows were either planked or blackened out, evidence of the halt in reconstruction. Windows of heavy metal angels were propped against the red and black walls, waiting for installation that would most likely never occur. From her vantage point in the former choir loft, Alexa felt a rush of excitement

and hope as the kids separated, refereed by a good-looking fair-haired young punker, and she saw Natalie Lambert, gagged and bound, being restrained by a woman who instantly reminded Alex of LaCroix. The one they called Vixen.

Now it begins.

Alexa found the sound system, popped in a cassette and caused mayhem below as Def Leppard choked mid-scream. They were alerted there was an intruder.

"He's here," Vixen seethed. She yanked mercilessly on Natalie's long, curly, brown hair and Nat winced in pain. "Your lover is here to rescue you, Doctor." Vixen's breath smelled of spoiled meat and blood. A derelict's body slumped lifelessly where she had dropped it after feeding. Natalie wanted to throw up, wanted to scream, wanted to wake up from the nightmare.

Charles tried to intervene. "Vixen, stop now, throw yourself on the mercy of the ancients. Let her go before the Enforcers show up and we're all summarily staked as your accomplices."

"Fuck off, Charles." Vixen spat blood at him. "You're weak, you're like Knight. Just be grateful I don't destroy you for polluting our race as well."

The Pit exploded with "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" and Alex appeared in full light in the loft.

Charles turned back to his former lover. "Think about what I said, Vixen. This doesn't bode well." He walked down the three steps to where his followers gathered to watch the stranger.

Natalie's brown eyes tried to scream out, behind her gag she made pleading noises, she fought against the girl's vice-like hold on her, but the more she struggled, the more painful the leather straps cut into her slim wrists. She felt blood trickling into her palms and prayed Vixen's hunger wouldn't be excited by the smell.

This was not an Alex she knew, Nat whimpered. Alexa had transformed, and despite her stature, she was an imposing image as she flew down to the nave, dressed in black, head to toe, not unlike the rockers clustered together. Even over the relentless beat of Iron Butterfly they could hear the scraping of Alex's talons on the wooden pews painted black as she strutted to the sanctuary, looking very self-assured. Alex stopped, legs slightly apart. "I like to pick my own background music."

"Who are you?" Vixen demanded. "What do you want here?"

"I want my property," Alexa announced firmly. "The bitch is mine."

****

He'd gone to the club, hoping he would find both of the women there. Only Janette greeted him with sobriety. "She's not here, Nikola, " Janette told him. "She's gone for Natalie."

He grabbed her naked arms angrily. "And you let her go? You let her go on a blood hunt knowing she's never done it? What in hell is wrong with you?" He shoved her into the bar.

"She is doing what is demanded of her, Nick," Janette shot back as she rubbed her arms. "You gravely underestimate Alexia. She is trying to salvage what's happened."

"No, No, they can't come," he insisted. "You know who's behind these murders, don't you?"

She told him all she knew.

He readied to leave when she called out his name.

"Let her," Janette commanded.

"I can't," Nick said. "I can't let her..."

"Destroy her purity?" the vampire asked.

"Don't mock me, Janette," he demanded.

"I'm not, my love." Her voice took on new authority. "I'm beginning to see many things differently, as you must. She is attempting to prevent disaster. Help her if you can, but don't interfere."

"You're...different, Janette." He was confused, bewildered. "What's happened to you?"

"Maybe I've decided to accept the inevitable," she told him. Again he began to leave. "Nick?"

"Yes?"

She glided forward, a queen without a crown. "I have to know."

Nick asked, "Yes?"

"Your angel." She noticed the anguish flash in his eyes. "What was her name?"

He seemed to stagger in his thoughts. "Her name? I...uh..."

She kissed him on the mouth. "The Pit, Chinatown. Go now."

****

"You want what?" Vixen was incensed.

Alex closed the distance between herself, Natalie, and Vixen. "Didn't LaCroix ever teach you it's not nice to steal other people's property? Or are you stupid as well as impolite?" She didn't wait for Vixen's reply, instead shot a reproving glance at Charles and his tribe. "Are you part of this?"

"No, mistress," he said respectfully to the ancient.

"Then take them and leave," she commanded. "You have no place here. This is between myself and this--thing." Her glowing eyes bore through Vixen. She was aware of the youngsters scurrying out of the church.

Charles lingered at the back of the vestibule and watched.

"Now give her back to me," Alexa insisted. "She's mine."

"No, this one belongs to Knight, she's his lover!" Vixen's voice became agitated. She was showing signs of stress and anxiety. The female doctor could see the clear signs of madness in the platinum blonde.

"No, she's my lover," Alexa drew closer, became more menacing. Her fangs extended fully and Natalie became more terrified than ever.

Vixen began laughing, the same insane laughter that followed LaCroix's presence. Indeed the inner pull was extremely potent so close to his minion. "Prove it," Vixen giggled, she tore the gag from Natalie's mouth. 'Go 'head, feed!" She shoved Natalie into Alex's arms. "I want you to prove she's your bitch."

Carefully, with exceptional tenderness, Alexa took Nat's face in her hands. She projected a thought into her mind while saying, "Natasha, know that I am bound to you and that I would defy even death for you." She pulled Natalie's face toward her and kissed her mouth, all the while forcing a thought into the human's conscience.

"Alex!"

Nick rushed forward. "Nat!"

"Now!" Alex ordered Natalie, who dropped to her knees and rolled down the wooden stairs, landing at Nick's boots. He pulled her up, freeing her hands with ease, holding her tightly to himself. He started forward, but Natalie held on to him.

"You fucking bitch!" Vixen propelled herself at Alexa. "You lied to me! I'll kill you and I'll drain that thing and take him to hell!" She lunged, canines glistening still with blood from the recent kill, trying to break past the blonde woman in order to reach Knight, her intended victim. "He's mine, I want his life!" She was out of control.

Alex blocked Vixen, the wisdom of her age coupled with knowledge, proved strong even for so intent an adversary. They scuffled and pulled, snarled and clawed at one another. Nick tried to move, but Alex shoved the girl into a bank of windows. They shattered with a hideous sound--glass smashing, the music pounding, and all that growling...

"Get her out of here, Nick!" screamed Alex over the noise. "Get her out of here!" She turned back to the young vampire, now shimmering with fragments of colored glass in her white hair, on her leather clothes.

Nick went to Natalie. "Can you walk out?"

"No, my leg, she cracked it at the lab." The human was in intense pain, her right leg was beginning to swell angrily. "Oh, God, Nick, Alex-Oh, God, oh, God..." She began to faint and he caught her in his arms and started to carry her out swiftly. Outside, the street was alive with the arrival of people and cops and amid it all, Schanke, gun drawn.

"It ends here, Vixen." Alex picked up a long piece of broken stained glass.

Vixen, bloodied and mad beyond any comprehension, struggled to fight back, but age and wisdom were superior. "He loved me, loves me still." She giggled wildly. "I killed for him! I--I do his bidding--I will destroy his enemy--blacken the Knight, he told me--"

Alexa asked, "He told you when, child? When did he tell you what to do?"

Moving in little mechanical jerks, the girl's head lopped to one side, blood was drooling from her mouth, she continued her giggling. "Last night...he always comes at night--night--Knight--"

"Then go to him now, child of darkness." Her words were soothing. She didn't want to cause more pain than...she swung out and arced the slice of white glass and neatly severed Vixen's head--

The glass had been shaped like an angel's wing. It shattered on the black floor into a million shards.

From her back, she pulled out the flaregun she'd stolen from Nick's closet and shot the orange flares into the neon signs proclaiming The Pit. Small explosions rippled through the corrupted wooden building, fires sparked on the opened cans of paint and varnish. It became an inferno. There was no remnant of Vixen to be found.

Another fallen angel had gone to the Pit.

Now the realization struck Alexa. Her hands, clothes, her mouth were smeared with blood...she had killed another, tasted her blood down her throat...she could not deny the sweetness of the rich flow as it hit her stomach and made her hungry for more...she staggered back, tripping over falling debris, indifferent to the conflagration all about her...impure, sullied by blood, she struggled not to fall into the snakepit called madness...she might have burned if strong arms hadn't caught her as she collapsed and dragged her out of the burning structure.

****

She held her reddened hands and cried. "Blood, so much blood...didn't want to kill her..."

Don Schanke eased his hold on her, took out his handkerchief and wiped her soiled cheeks. "Shhh, baby. Shhh, it's over now. All over now."

"Hate me, he will..." It was hard to cling to sanity while tasting the blood in her mouth. "I am so sorry..."

"You did a brave thing, honey." He was gentle with her, kind. "You did a good thing."

Natalie pushed lightly against Nick's back. "Go to her, Nick, she needs you."

Nick was shocked. He'd been unprepared for Alex's actions. He went to her, "Alex--"

"I'm sorry, Nicholas," she sniffed. "I wanted to protect the dream."

His face registered utter amazement. His fingers went to her round cheeks, to the wetness there. "Alex, you're crying," he finally said.

"Of course she's crying, Nick," Schanke told him. "She's only human." He sauntered away.

Natalie wobbled closer, covered her mouth with her hand, let herself go.

Alex's tears were shiny clear, and...beautifully human. They hadn't lost the dream.

****

That evening, the passing of humanity gone again until it returned at some other future moment...he took her to his bed, surrounded by many candles, their music lulling the air, the rain slow and quiet against the panes of glass...they began to make love.

His mouth moved away from her's as he'd felt her teeth elongating. She opened her eyes questioning his hesitation. "No, not that way, Alex," Nicholas whispered. "There's been enough blood tonight." They loved as mortals.

****

The Raven was deadly silent, empty save for the owner, Nick and Alexa. Janette had tried to negotiate with little avail. They didn't have to wait long. The Enforcers manifested, stake in hand. They'd come for Alex, who clung to Nick.

With grace befitting a queen, Janette stepped in front of the couple and blocked an Enforcer from taking her away. "En Famille," she invoked the words which elevated her to LaCroix's lofty station. They belonged to her family now, she would protect them. She placed herself in jeopardy to protect Nick and especially Alex.

Janette turned to face the couple. "Exile," she said to Alex, "until they decree you may return."

Better the pain of separation than the finality of the stake.

****

She was gone at sunset the next day.

A week later, a cassette arrived and Nick invited Natalie to hear it. "I just can't bring myself to listen to it alone, you know?"

He popped the tape into his deck and Alex's familiar voice poured from the speakers. "This is Outlaw Radio, coming to you from Underground Seattle..." A familiar piece of classic rock began behind her narrative. "Welcome to the midnight hour, welcome to our first programme...this goes to friends and lovers, family on distant shores..." The music began to swell. "My name is Layla...your lady of the Knight..."

The Moody Blues chorused "Nights in White Satin." Nick rose from the couch, and went to the window to stare out at the last frayed ribbons of light streaking across the Toronto skyline. The words evoked so very much, too much.

"You know, Nat," he said quietly, over the music. "I think I might be feeling a little human tonight." He turned around, went to her, and knelt beside her where she sat. "I think my heart's breaking a little."

Her eyes were glossy, she never looked prettier. "Me, too, Nick. Me, too."

They listened to the song in silence, savoring the words.

****

There was a strange tonal quality to the old instrument as his long fingers carefully tuned it...he was singing to himself, something over and over like a litany, words in Italian. Then again, he was proficient in most languages. One gains great wisdom after a millennia. Each string tenderly tuned.

"Sono desto," came the singsong phrase. "Sono desto."

The softened laughter was frighteningly familiar.

"I've been awakened."

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